THE ORPHAN'S TALES

Where the story ends, the magic begins....

IN THE NIGHT GARDEN



The magic continues. The fantasy never ends.

IN THE CITIES OF COIN AND SPICE

CATHERYNNE M. VALENTE

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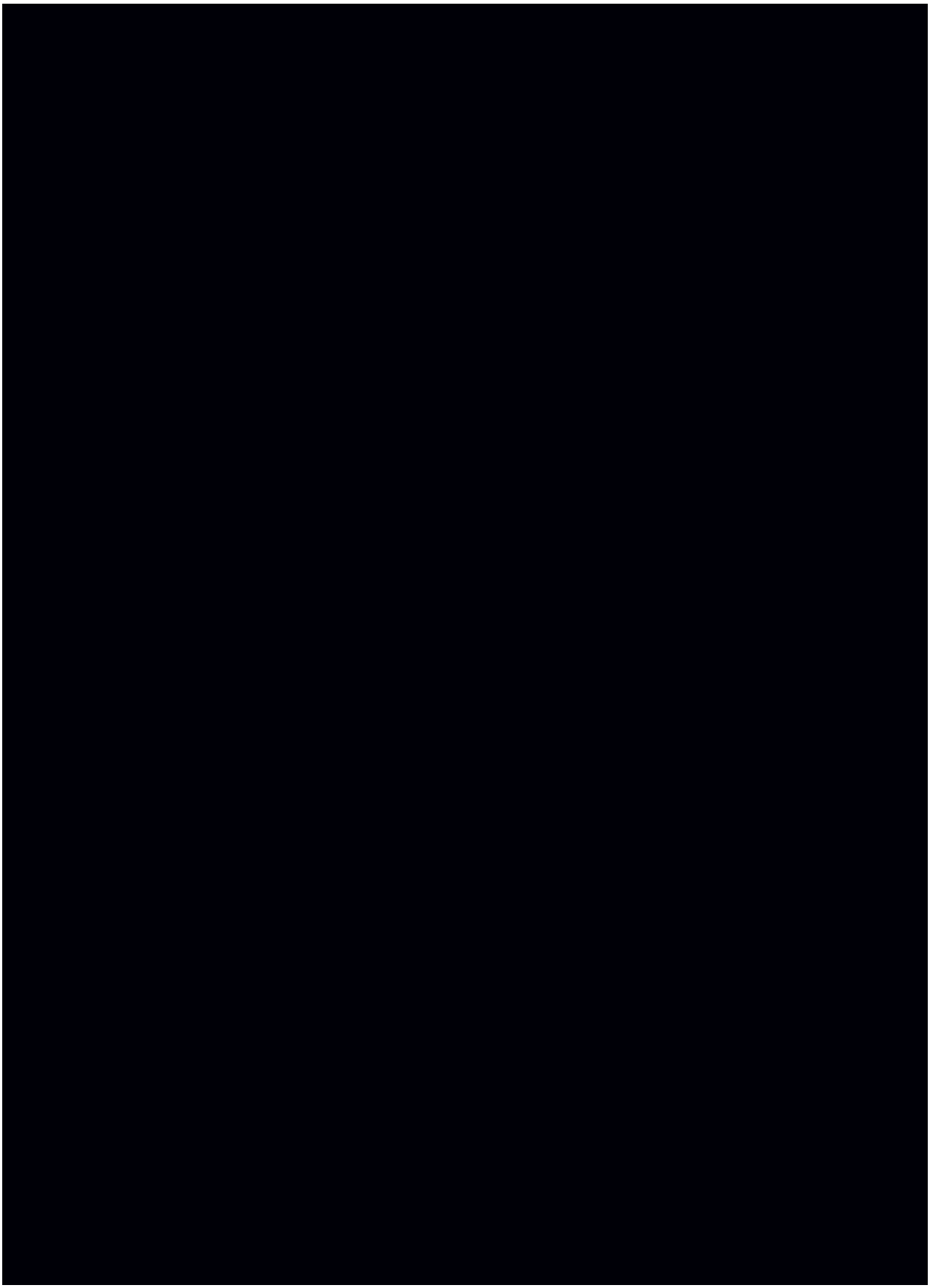
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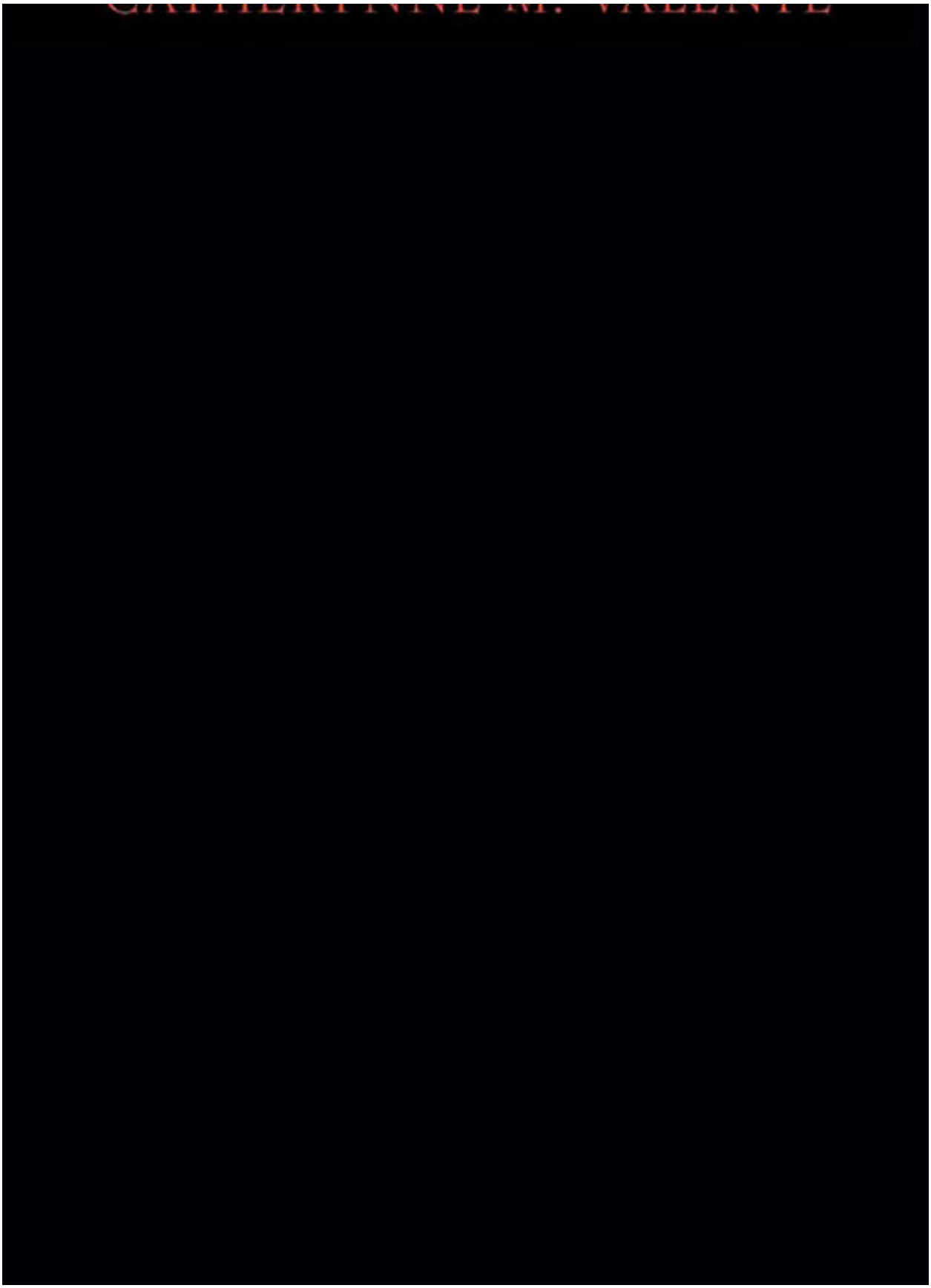
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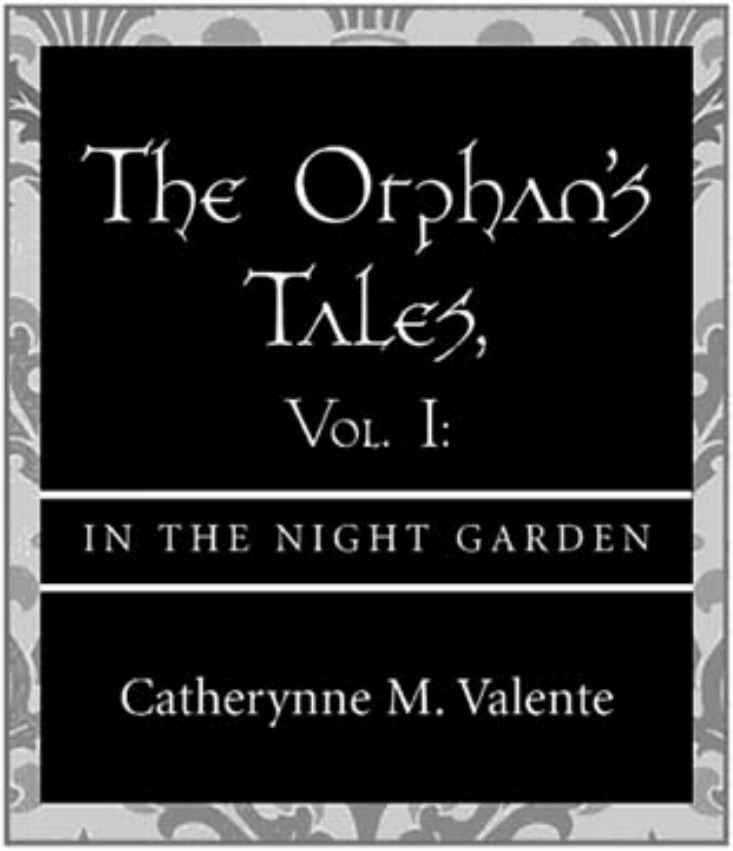
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CATHERYNNE M. VALENTE






The Orphan's Tales,
Vol. I:
IN THE NIGHT GARDEN
Catherynne M. Valente

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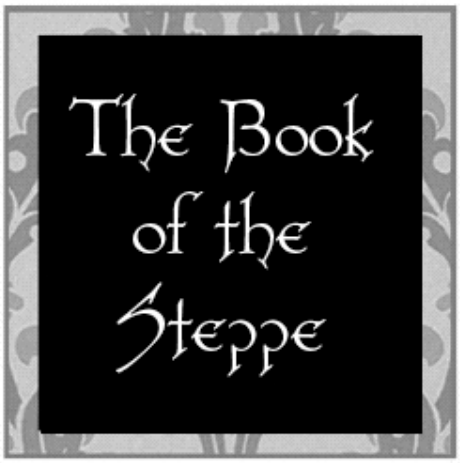
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Acknowledgments
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For Sarah, who,
when she was very young,
wanted a Garden


The Book
of the
Steppe

PRELUDE

ONCE THERE WAS A CHILD WHOSE FACE WAS LIKE THE NEW MOON SHINING on cypress trees and the feathers of waterbirds. She was a strange child, full of secrets. She would sit alone in the great Palace Garden on winter nights, pressing her hands into the snow and watching it melt under her heat. She wore a crown of garlic greens and wisteria; she drank from the silver fountains studded with lapis; she ate cold pears under a canopy of pines on rainy afternoons.

Now this child had a strange and wonderful birthmark, in that her eyelids and the flesh around her eyes were stained a deep indigo-black, like ink pooled in china pots. It gave her the mysterious, taciturn look of an owl on ivory rafters, or a raccoon drinking from the swift-flowing river. It colored her eyes such that when she was grown she would never have to smoke her eyelashes with kohl.

For this mark she was feared, and from her earliest days, the girl was abandoned to wander the Garden around the many-towered Palace. Her parents regarded her with trepidation and terror, wondering if her deformity reflected poorly on their virtue. The other nobles firmly believed she was a demon, sent to destroy the glittering court. Their children, who often roamed the Garden like a flock of wild geese, kept away from her, lest she curse them with her terrible powers. The Sultan could not decide—after all, if she were a demon, it would not do to offend her infernal kin by doing away with her like so much cut grass. In the end, all preferred that she simply remain silent and far away, so that none would have to confront the dilemma.

And so it went like this for many years, while thirteen summers like fat orange roses sprang and withered.

But one day another child came near to her, though not too near, hesitant as a deer about to bolt into the shadows. His face was like a winter sun, his form like a river reed. He stood before the girl in her tattered silk dress and shabby cloak which had once been white, and touched her eyelids with his sweet-scented forefinger. She found, to her surprise, that she endured his touch, for she was lonely and ever full of sorrow.

"Are you really a spirit? A *very* wicked spirit? Why are your eyes dark like that, like the lake before the dawn?" The pretty boy-child cocked his head to one side, an ibis in midstream. The girl said nothing.

"I am not afraid of you!" The boy stood his ground but his voice broke hoarsely. The girl continued to stare at him while the willow trees wavered in the east wind. When she spoke her voice was the low hum of cicadas in the far-misted hills.

"Why not?"

"I am very brave. One day I will be a great General and wear a scarlet cloak." At this there was almost a smile on the girl's pale lips.

"And you have come to slay the great girl-demon who haunts the Garden?" she whispered.

"Oh, no, I…" The boy spread his hands, feeling suddenly that he had shown very bad form somewhere along the way.

"No one has spoken so many words to me since I saw the winter snows through a warm window draped in furs." The girl stared again, impossibly still. All at once, a tiny light stole through her dusky eyes and she seemed to make a decision within herself. "Shall I tell you the truth, then? Tell you my secret? You of all the children who wear ruby rings and smell of olive soap?" Her voice had gone so quiet it was almost without breath.

"I asked, didn't I? I can keep secrets. My sister says I am very good at it, like the King of the Thieves in the nursery story." There was another long silence,

as clouds covered the sun. And the girl began to speak very softly, almost afraid to hear her own voice.

"On an evening, when I was a very small child, an old woman came to the great silver gate, and twisting her hands among the rose roots told me this: I was not born with this mark. A spirit came into my cradle on the seventh day of the seventh month of my life, and while my mother slept in her snow white bed, the spirit touched my face, and left there many tales and spells, like the tattoos of sailors. The verses and songs were so great in number and so closely written that they appeared as one long, unbroken streak of jet on my eyelids. But they are the words of the river and the marsh, the lake and the wind. Together they make a great magic, and when the tales are all read out, and heard end to shining end, to the last syllable, the spirit will return and judge me.

"After the old woman vanished into the blue-faced night, I spent each day hidden in a thicket of jasmine and oleander, trying to read what I could in a cast-off bronze mirror, or in the reflections of the Garden pools. But it is difficult; I must read them backwards, and I can only read one eye at a time." She stopped, and the last was no louder than a spider weaving its opaline threads.

"And there is no one to listen."

The boy stared. He looked closely and could see wavering lines in the solid black of her eyelid, hints of alphabets and letters he could not imagine. The closer he looked, the more the shapes seemed to leap at him, clutch at him, until he was quite dizzy.

He licked his lips. They were all whispers now, the two of them, conspirators and thieves. The other children had all gone, and they stood alone under the braided whips of a gnarled willow.

"Tell me? Tell me one of the tales from your eyelids. Please. Just one." He was terrified that she would rebuke him and run, like the hound which is often beaten. But she only continued to look at him with those strange, dark eyes.

"You are kind to me when no one else will come near. And my tales are all I have to give as thanks. But you must come away from the open Garden, into my hiding place, for I would have no one else know. You would surely be

punished, and they would take my mirror and my knife, which are all I own, and lock me away to keep the demon spirit from hollowing their fine house."

And so they crept away from the yellow-tinged willow, across the endless rows of roses. They ducked under an arch of chestnut blossoms and were suddenly enveloped in a bower of white petals, the perfume touching them like hands. Red branches had thatched themselves into a kind of low roof, and there was ample room on the soft, compact earth thatched with leaves for them both to sit.

"I will tell you the first tale I was able to read, from the crease of my left eyelid."

The boy sat very still, listening like a silk-eared hare deep in the forest.

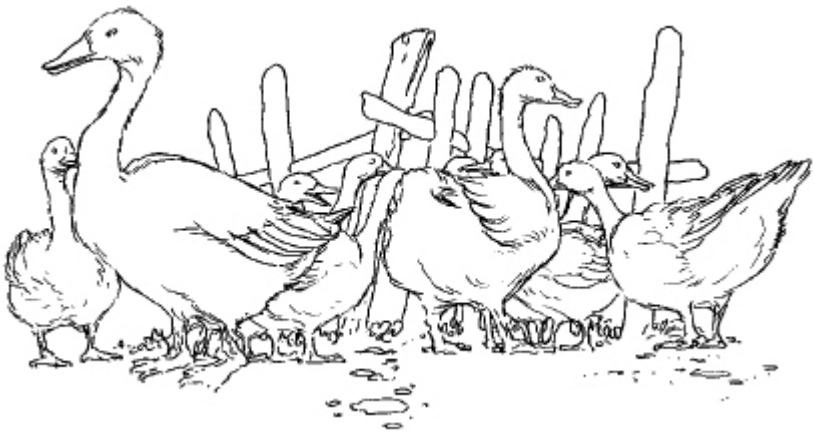
"Once in a far away there was a restless Prince, who was not satisfied by his father's riches, or the beauty of the Palace women, or the diversions of the banquet hall. This Prince was called Leander, after the tawny lion that bounds across the steppes like a fearful wind. One night he crept out of the vine-covered walls of the great Castle like a hawk on the hunt, to find a quest and silence the gnaw of discontent in his breast…"



Now the Prince stole into the night, the shadows wrapping around him like slippery river eels, and his footfalls were black and soundless on the pine needles. He journeyed through the Forest, stars flooding overhead as though they had burst through some gilded dam, having no particular plan except to get as far from the Palace as possible before the sun rose up and his father's hounds were set on his scent. The trees made a roof of many tiles over his head, a scented mosaic studded with blue clouds. For the first time in his young life, the Prince felt a fierce kind of happiness, rimmed with light.

As dawn swept up behind him like a clever thief, he rested against the trunk of a great baobab, leaning his head against the knotted wood. He breakfasted on cheese and dried meat he had stolen from the kitchens. The salt of the meat was more delicious than anything he had ever tasted, and he slept for a few hours under the sky which bloomed in the colors of wisteria and lilies.

Traveling on, it was not long before he came to a little hut in a pleasant meadow with a thatched roof and a well-made wooden door, round with solid brass studs. The chimney smoked cheerily, smelling of sage and cedar. Milling around the house was a flock of gray-feathered geese, circling like cirrus clouds, ethereal and wild. They were very fine animals and beautiful, squawking and ruffling their feathers under the curling eaves of camphor and fresh straw.



Now the Prince was young and resourceful, but not very wise, and he had taken only a little food from the kitchens and a few apples from the orchards. He had assumed that he could forage easily, for the whole world must be as fertile as his father's lands, and all trees must be as full of jeweled fruit, all animals as docile and savory, all peasants as agreeable and generous. It was beginning to be clear that this might not be the case, and his stomach growled noisily. He resolved to replenish his pack before he went further. There were, after all, so many geese, and certainly whatever warm and festive creatures dwelt in that fine hut, they would not even notice if one of the long-necked animals disappeared.

The Prince had been trained to hunt and sneak from his earliest childhood, and he crept silently on well-muscled thighs from his hiding place. He stole behind a great plow and waited among the high summer grasses, searching for the right moment, controlling his breathing and slowing his hammering heart. The midmorning sun was hot on his neck. His hair crawled with sweat, trickling down into his collar, but he did not move at all until, finally, one of the lovely geese wandered away from the pack, peering around the blade of the plow and fixing him with wide black eyes. Her gaze was very strange, endless and deep as the autumn moon, pupilless and knowing.

But swift as a sleek wolf, the Prince escaped her gaze. He caught her slender neck in his hand and snapped it, the sound no louder than a twig caught underfoot. He rose from the dry grass and moved back towards the tree line, but the geese had noticed that one of their number was missing, and sent up a great alarm, terrible and piercing.

The door of the hut flew open and out stomped a fearful woman, a flurry of streaming gray hair and glinting axe blade. Her face was wide and flat, covered with horrible and arcane markings, great black tattoos and scars cutting across her features so that it was impossible to tell if she had once been beautiful. She wore a wide leather belt studded with silver, two long knives glittering at her hips. She screamed horribly and the sound of it shook the cypresses and the oaks, vibrating in the air like a shattered flute.

"What have you done? What have you done? Awful, awful boy!—Villain, demon!" She screeched again, higher and shriller than any owl, and the geese joined her, keening and wailing. Their howls gouged at the air, at the rich red earth, a sound both monstrous and alien, full of inhuman, bottomless grief. It dug at his ears like claws.

Finally, the woman quieted and simply shook her great head, weeping. The Prince stood, stunned, more chagrined over his lack of stealth than her rage. She was, after all, only a woman, and it was only a bird. She was dwarfish and no longer young, and he knew he had nothing to fear from her. He clutched the bird's corpse behind his back, hoping his broad chest and arms would hide it.

"I have only just stumbled upon your house, Lady. I meant no offense." The wretched woman loosed her awful scream again, and her eyes grew hideously large. He had not noticed their yellowish cast before, but it was certainly there now, feral and sickly.

"You lie, you lie! You have killed my goose, my beautiful bird, my child! She was mine and you broke her neck! My darling, my child!" She broke into bitter weeping. The Prince could not understand. He drew the goose's body from behind his back to hold it out to the crone.

But in his fist he held not a bird, but a radiant young woman, small and delicate as a crane poised in the water, long black hair like a coiled serpent winding around his hand, for he clutched her at the root of the braided mane. She was clothed in diaphanous rags which barely covered her shimmering limbs. And her long, smooth neck was neatly broken.

The tattooed woman ran at him, swinging her axe like a scythe through wheat, and he dropped the girl's body with a horrible thump onto the grass. When she reached him, she stopped short and breathed hard into his face,

stinking of rotted plums and dark, secret mosses. She lifted her axe and cut off two fingers on the Prince's left hand, licking the spray of blood from her cracked lips. He could not run, the blow was so sudden and complete, but only cry out and clutch his maimed hand. He knew if he bolted from her he would lose much more than a finger. He promised the crone a thousand thousand kingdoms, the treasures of a hundred dragons, babbling oaths like a child. But she would have none of it, and slowly moved her free hand to one of the long knives.

"You have killed my child, my only daughter."

She laid her ponderous axe on the damp earth and drew, with one long, sinuous sigh, the bright-bladed knife from its sheath—

The girl paused, and looked into her companion's eyes, which were like deep marshes at sunset.

"Don't stop!" he choked. "Tell me! Did she kill him then and there?"

"It is night, boy. You must go in to dinner and I must make my bed among the cedar boughs. Each to our own."

The boy gaped, grasping frantically for a reason to stay and hear the fate of the wounded Prince. Hurriedly, he murmured, "Wait, wait. I will go to dinner, and steal food for us like the brave Prince Leander, and creep out under cover of night like a hawk on the hunt, and stay the night with you, here under the stars, which are bright as crane feathers in the sun. Then you can finish the story." He looked at her with a hope whose fierceness was brighter than any torch now lit at court.

She was quiet for a moment, head bowed like a temple postulant.

Finally, she nodded, without looking up.

"Very well."

In the Garden

As the last harp strings of crimson sighed into the silent westward darkness, the boy returned, clutching a handkerchief filled to bursting. He clambered into the little thicket and proudly laid out their feast. The girl sat as she had when he left her, still as one of the calm profiles of the Garden statues. Her strange quiet unnerved him, frightened him. He could not hold her dark gaze, her wide, almond-shaped eyes ringed about with their strange markings.

Instead, he glanced awkwardly at the steaming food. On the little square of silk lay a glistening roasted dove, fat peaches and cold pears, a half loaf of buttery bread covered in jam, broiled turnips and potatoes, a lump of hard cheese, and several sugared violets whisked away from the table garnish. He drew from his pocket a flask of pale watered wine, the great prize of his kitchen adventures.

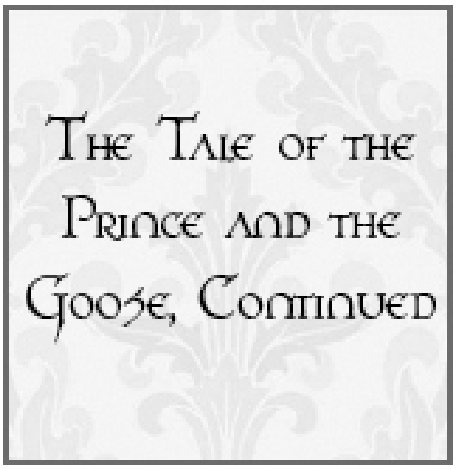
The girl made no move, did not reach for the dove or the pears. Her crow-feather hair wafted into her face, borne by the warm breeze, and all at once she began to shudder and weep. The boy did not know where to look, did not wish to shame her by witnessing her tears. He fixed his eyes on the shivering boughs of a distant cypress tree, and waited. By and by, the sniffling ceased, and he turned back to her.

Of course, he understood that she had never eaten so well in her life, as she had never been welcome at the Palace dinners—he imagined that she had lived on the fruits and nuts of the Garden, foraging like a beggar. But he could not understand why plenty would make someone weep. His hands were soft and

scented with rose oil, and his hair gleamed. He had known nothing but the court and the peculiar adoration it bestowed on beautiful youths. But he was a child of nobility, and would not embarrass her with displays of compassion.

Wordlessly, she tore a wing off the coppery dove and delicately mouthed the meat. With a small, ornate silver knife hidden in the folds of her plain shift she sliced a pear in two. As she extended one pale green half to the boy, he wondered vaguely how she had come upon such a handsome knife. Certainly he had nothing so fine, and yet her dress, such as it was, was threadbare and her fingernails dirty. A thread of fragrant juice ran down her chin, and for the first time, the girl smiled, and it was like the moonrise over a mountain stream, the light caught in a stag's pale antlers, clear water running under the night sky. When she spoke again, the boy leaned forward eagerly, shoved his thick, dark hair back from his face, bit into a ripe peach and stuffed a bit of cheese into his mouth, mechanically, without noticing the taste. Her large eyes slid shut as she spoke, so that her eyelids and their mosaic covering seemed to float like black lilies in the paleness of her face.

"The wild woman drew her long knife from her belt and held it for a moment, almost playfully, at the Prince's smooth neck, a sliver of breath before the fatal cut…"



"Let me live, Lady," he whispered, "I beg you. I shall stay here and be your servant; I will take the place of the bird-maiden and remain loyal to you for all of my days. I will be yours. I am young and strong. Please."

He did not know what moved him to make such an offer, or if he meant to keep his promise, true as law. But the words ripped from him as though the woman had put her fist into his throat and seized them for her own.

Her eyes blazed like clouds filled with a thousand tiny seeds of lightning. But they held now a calculating gleam, and indeed, in another instant the knife had vanished from the Prince's throat.

"Even if I agree it will not save you," she hissed, her voice like a great toad singing at dawn. "But I will tell you the tale of my daughter and how she became winged. Then, perhaps, you will see what it is you offer, and we shall discover whether or not you prefer death."

But she did not speak. Instead, she tore a long strip of mottled fur from the collar of her tunic and bandaged his hand. Her touch was practiced and much softer than he expected, almost, though not quite, tender. From a pouch at her waist she drew some withered leaves, among which he thought he could recognize bay and juniper. She pressed them into his ruined stumps. Tightening the poultice, she examined her work and judged it fair.

"First, I am not blind. I can see that you are young and strong, and there is no doubt I can use up your youth and vigor like well water. This is not the

question. Can you listen? Can you learn? Can you keep silent? I wonder. I believe you are a spoiled brat with no ears at all."

The Prince bent his head, penitent. Already his hand had stopped its thick throbbing, and he said nothing, judging that nothing was the best shield he could fashion against her. The crone sat against a large stone and rolled a few musky leaves between her gnarled fingers…



I CAME FROM THE NORTHERN TRIBES, THE STEPPE-WOMEN with their shaggy horses and snow-clotted braids. I'm sure you've heard stories—we were monsters, we were unnatural, we deserved what we got.

Among the unnatural monsters, I was more monstrous and more unnatural than the rest. They called me Knife. When I was young and my strength was taut as a bow string, I was the best rider of all the young girls. I had many necklaces of jasper and wolf-tooth, three fine hunting knives, a strong bow that I could draw into the shape of the full moon, a quiver full of arrows fletched in hawk feathers, and a wildcat hide from my first kill. All around me were the wild, honey-colored steppes, the fat deer we hunted, and the sleek, brown, fragrant horses I loved. They ran like ripples in a mountain lake. I ran alongside them, and rode astride them, and I slept against their flanks.

I was happy, the sun was high. I had enough.

My sisters were all older than I, my brothers away fighting on the borders of our country, and so I was free, and feral, and my smile was often too like a snarl. One day Grandmother Bent-Bow, whom everyone called Grandmother but who was truly mine, and had the ugliest face I knew, like beaten bark, called me to her under the new moon. She told me that she had found a man for me to marry. I loved my grandmother very much, but I did not care to be married. I was a muscle-knotted mare; I needed no mount to slow me down. But Grandmother's word was the closest thing to law we had. Monsters, you know, cannot appreciate the niceties of commandments carved in stone.

And so, even though I was very young, I stood in her beautiful deerskin breeches, with my proud wildcat hide on my shoulders, and wed the man she had chosen. He was dark, with very bright eyes, and we hunted together—at first only cutting meat side by side, but slowly we became one hunter, leaping onto heavy-boned deer with twin knives flashing. We smiled and snarled and smiled again under a sky blazing with stars, like milk spilled across a black hide.

When I was not hunting with him, my sisters Sheath and Quiver—for daughters come always in threes among us—and I raced each other, practiced the songs of our tribe and the twanging songs of our bows, and from Grandmother we learned magic. I braided her silver hair while she taught us secret things—monstrous things, unnatural things. Under the Snake-Star and the Bridle-Star and the Knife-Star, my own namesake, Grandmother prickled my face with delicate tattoos and called me her best girl, called me initiate, and horsewoman true.

We grew, we hunted, we laughed. I was happy. But though I did not know it, the sun was getting lower in the sky.

One day your father's army—

Stop gaping, boy. Did you think I did not know who you were the second you crossed onto my land?

One day your father's army came screeching up from the south like a prairie fire. He wanted our fat herds and strong horses. He wanted the heads of monsters on his wall. He wanted to clean his kingdom of unnatural things, things which squalled and crept and darkened the corners of the light.

I had never seen anything like his soldiers. They wore armor like fish scales, with towering smoky plumes, and they shone like a thousand silver clouds on horses black as demons. I shot all my arrows into those clouds, and all of Sheath's arrows, which were fletched with crow feathers, after a man cut her sword arm off. From a ruin of her blood and dark, wet insides, I pulled her blade and tried to swing it into the gut of one of the clouds, but I was never much use with blades, no matter my name, and he was on top of me before my blow had even begun its arc.

He was a filthy man—and when a scrabbling creature who spends her nights squeezed between horses under no kind of roof calls a body filthy, you can be

sure it is no ordinary dirt-stench. Leather-lashed beard bristling with lice and blood, he picked me up by the waist, hauling me up onto his warhorse. To shut my cursing mouth, he smashed my face with an armored fist. The glove floated before me, silvery and oddly beautiful, and then my forehead split and glutted red.

What sort of monster was I? I could not even hold my own against one knight; I could not even get a sword into one hollering pig. I looked up through a sheet of tears and blood and clay-slick dirt to see my new husband racing after us, screaming like a wounded wolf, and your father with his raven plume riding behind him. The black-feathered rider rammed a colossal blade through his poor chest with as little thought or effort as squeezing a fly from the air with two fingers. I saw the bits of bone and gore fly forward; I watched my husband spit blood onto the grass and kneel as if in prayer before he went face-first into the blood-whipped mud.

I tried to stop crying and pressed my face into the comfort of the strange horse's flank—at least it was a horse, at least its sweat and hide were not so different from my own long-legged friends'—smelling for the goodness of my family in those thick, powerful haunches.

We rode south.

The sun had disappeared.

That first fist of many marked my face, knotted my forehead into scar like a sailor's rope. The rest, though, is my doing. We rode for a long time. I lost track of the days. The sour smell of the filthy man and his starving horse enclosed me. There was hardly enough to feed the knights and the women, let alone those poor beasts, who should have been oiled and loved and held while they slurped clear water.

After a few days Quiver managed to kill herself by leaping into a river; the current like a breath of night carried her far from me, who should have caught her and held her face to mine. She was the oldest, yet I live and she is dead.

I knew before we arrived at the Palace what would happen to me. Even monsters are not stupid. I would be a slave, meant for the pleasure of your father and his grime-bathed soldiers. I would be dressed prettily, and oiled like

a whore. Slavery did not disturb me; escape would be simple enough. But I would do nothing for their pleasure, and I would not be beautiful for them. They found my grandmother's tattoos, those beautiful dark lines snaking over my face, to be *exotic*.

My hatred burned black and furious as an iron furnace. And so one night when my friend the filth-monger had fallen into a drunken sleep I took his dagger from the sheath at his side. It was a lovely weapon, with a straight, clean blade that shimmered like the water of Quiver's grave. I placed it at my cheeks, and drew the knife twice, three times, down across my face, slashing the flesh and obliterating forever whatever beauty a monster owns.



Of course the men were enraged when the morning came and my face was as thickly smeared with blood as if I had covered it in a crimson hide. I was taken from the tent and thrown into the train of true slaves, the miserable lot which were destined for mines and quarries. I truly believed this would be my place, too, cutting rocks and scooping metal from the mountains, and I exulted —what is easier than running off when those mountains are all around and welcoming? I felt as though I was within a fox's skin, full of tricks and victory. But I was mistaken.

The Palace reared up before us like a stallion, heavy and fierce—and to my shock, I was not sent beyond it, to the gold-riddled hills, or the limestone-swathed valleys, but dragged inside. Down, down, down, down a thousand stairs and through a hundred gates I was led by rough hands, and thrown into a tiny cell dank with sweat and years. Ah, I thought then, this is my punishment for spoiling a soldier's war prize.

I howled. I screamed and screeched like a flock of frenzied owls, clawing at my hair and the stone floor until my fingers shredded into uselessness. I lay on the floor like a child, curled up and weeping, my escape made impossible, my life to be spent in this place, a hundred nights from my snowy, windblown steppes. It was then that I heard a chuckling voice from the darkness, familiar and roughly sweet, rubbing my cheek like wolf's fur.

"Are you quite finished, girl?" it asked quietly. I looked into the murky air, into the corners of the room, where I expected to see piles of bones and old hair—instead, my grandmother sat cross-legged, clothed in rags and laughing.

"You needed to storm a bit, I know, but it is just getting indulgent now. Haven't I taught you anything?" She opened her skinny arms like beaten bark and I fell into her. I do not know how long she held me, how many times I died and was resurrected and died again. But when I looked up into her face, she was stroking my hair and smiling. "It isn't so bad, dear, they might have killed you."

"This is worse," I grunted. With a sound like a hand against a horse's side, my grandmother slapped me hard across my mangled face.

"No. You are alive. Your sisters are both dead. Why are you feeling sorry for yourself, you rotten child? I think I have spoiled you." I was stricken, and I stared like a dumb animal.

"They have brought me here because they think they can break me, or use me, or both," she mused. "After all, I am a very special slave. I belong to their silly court wizard now, with his hat and his rabbit tricks. I have decided to be happy about it—they will leave me here long enough that I know who is in charge and who is not, and then I will be brought before the King to show what a good dog I am. I will be more than close enough to him to cut his throat." She smiled brilliantly, full of cheer. "So we have little time to talk, for me to tell you what you need to know, so that you can decide to be happy about your fate, too." She pursed her lips together, examining my savaged cheeks. "It is good that you ruined your face, because it brought you to me, but also because beautiful women rarely work strong magic."

I watched her and listened, her words closing over me like a pool of cold water, rocking me and cooling my flushed skin. Her eyes glinted like an owl's, and her face was calm as the moon.

"Now, you listen. Before they come to separate us, I must tell you the story of my apprenticeship, so that you can come to know what I know, what you would have learned on your own, and your sisters too, if the King had not landed on us like a rock dropped from a great height. As it is, you must take what you can from these old bones."

The girl stopped her tale with a press of her gentle lips, looking off into the night with eyes of shadow and woven web.

"You stop and start like a stubborn tortoise," the boy said flatly, "always pulling your head in just when I want to hear more. It is very frustrating."

The girl smiled wanly, as though she meant to apologize, but could not quite manage it. She licked her lips delicately, forlornly tasting the last vestiges of the roasted dove.

"But I must rest a little. We can sleep for an hour, then I will continue." She paused, blushing to the tips of her temples. "You can lie beside me if you want; it gets cold here at night."

She made a space in the long grass and the boy awkwardly lay against her. For long moments, neither of them slept, stiff and tense against each other as though the one had not slept every night of his life beside a brother or a sister, and the other had not spent every night of hers in blossom bowers and tree hollows. He watched her, the wind rustling her hair like river rushes, until finally, she was asleep, and then, the softening of her limbs a kind of permission, drifted away himself.

But it was not very long until he was shaking her awake, thirsty for her stories as a beggar in an endless desert.



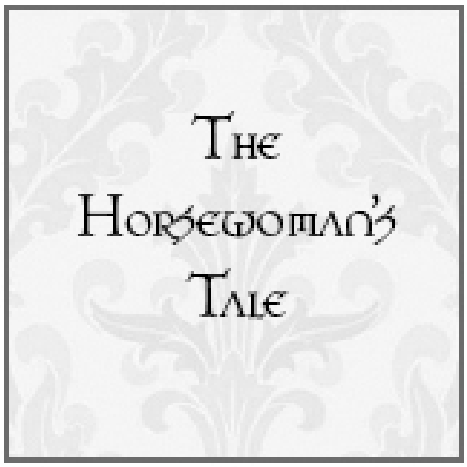
THE TALE OF MY LONG YEARS OF STUDY IS TOO much to impart to you in this small, dark time we have together, my child. What I will tell you is the story of a single night, the last night of my formal apprenticeship, the last night of my girlhood. It is a good story to tell here in the shadowed corners of the earth, in this deep-within-deep place, where the sun falters.

My mother died in a horse raid when I was very young, and her mother had died in childbirth, and so when I came of age there was no one to teach me, to show me the secret ways, to give me a place in the tribe. Instead, I was sent away, packed into a cart with hides and jewelry to pay for my fostering in a neighboring village, to be taught by the witch-woman of their people. My hair was thick and red, then, bright as a fire ripping through the steppes. My limbs were smooth and hard as hooves—the jangling cart bouncing across the wide emptiness between villages hardly affected me.

When I arrived, my mistress seemed to me fierce and beautiful and terrifying. Thurayya was very strict—she distrusted my foreignness, my red hair, and my simple name, and most of all my stubbornness. For one year I did nothing but serve her; sweep her hut, polish her blades, carry her water, comb her horses. She said nothing to me. I slept outside the hut, under the stars and cushioned by dry grass. Only in the second year did she allow me to sleep beside her, and begin my education. Is this the proper way to teach a girl? I don't know. But I could not bear to bring you up, or Quiver, or Sheath, that way. Perhaps I am not, in the end, as strong as my old mistress.

The first night of that second year, I lay stiffly against her old, musty skin, her sharp bones and stringy white hair turned almost my own shade by the last embers of fire, and without looking at me, she suddenly spoke.

"Listen, Bent-Bow, you little goat. See if you can't learn something besides milking yaks…"



OPEN YOUR EARS, AND LET THE SKY IN.

In the beginning, before you were the spark in the dream of a lice-shagged goat and a lonely farmhand, there was nothing but sky. It was black, and vast, and all the other things you might expect a sky with nothing floating around in it to be. But the sky was only a sky if you looked at it slantwise—if you looked at it straight, which of course, no one could, because there wasn't anyone to look any way, it was the long, slippery flank of a Mare.

The Mare was black, and vast, and all the other things you would expect a horse the size of everything to be.

After a long while, the Mare chewed a hole in herself, for reasons she has kept as her own. The hole filled up with light the way a hole in you or me would fill up with blood, and this was called a Star. They were the first, true children of the Mare, made of the flesh of her own body. And because she liked the light, and the company, she chewed other holes, roughly in the shapes of Badgers and Plows and Deer and Knives and Snails and Foxes and Grass and Water and suchlike, and so on until the Mare was ablaze with holes, and all the holes were Stars, and the sky was not very empty at all anymore.

Now, the holes were up and walking around like you and me by this time, and one, in roughly the shape of a Rider, climbed over the Mare and she became full, as full and huge as a horse the size of everything can be, until she

foaled the whole world in a rush of light and milk and black, black blood from the most secret depths of the sky. The grass and the rivers and the stones and women and horses and more Stars and men and clouds and birds and trees came dancing through the afterbirth of the Mare, and swam happily in her milk and stopped up her secret blood, and the world was made, and the oceans washed the shore, and the Mare went cantering into the corners of herself, which just barely showed through the burning field of her Stars, and lay in a pasture neither you nor I could guess at, and chewed her favorite Grass-Stars in peace.

Now the holes which were Stars were still full of light, and still walking around the sky, awkward as three-legged dogs. Without the Mare, the black was just black, and not a flank, not a hide, not a thing with smell and salt and fur. Naturally, this frightened the holes, since up until then they had always had the smell of the Mare in their noses and the feel of her at their backs. A few of the holes looked down on all the things which had come out of the Mare before she went off away from them, and thought that it seemed less terrible and dark than the sky—and besides, there were things like themselves there: badgers and plows and deer and knives and snails and foxes and grass and water. And even horses, which were like the Mare they remembered, only much smaller, and of many different colors.

And, my mange-ridden little goat, there they lived, just like you and I do, while the less brave of their brothers and sisters stayed up in the sky to light their way. And they were teachers and students and mothers and daughters and brothers and uncles and crabby old men. And they couldn't help it: everywhere they walked they carried their light, the light which, you remember, wasn't really light, but the Mare-blood of the first days of the world.

Now, in the beginning, they were so full of this blood-light that everything they touched went silver and white with it—it flowed out of them like sweat and all kinds of things were wet with it. But as time went on, there was less of the light to spill, and they began to be afraid that they would lose the last thing the Mare their mother had ever given them. But they were more afraid of the great black motherless sky, and would not leave the world again. So they went away into little clutches, like flowers growing in rocks, into the caves and the

hills and the rivers and the valleys, far off from anyone else, and touched only each other, for between them the light only pooled, and rippled, and did not leak from their bodies.

But after the Stars hid themselves away, the things they touched were still where they had left them, full of light, the light which was blood, and they glowed with the silver and white of it. And these things were special, flea-bed mine—where they were stones or plants they passed their light into deeper stones and into their seeds, and where they were people, they passed the light to their children, which diminished just as it had when the Stars first touched the world and the blood went out of them. It was not long before no one could tell what had been touched in the first days and what had not. The light was buried and secret.

But it was not gone. In many things and many people it is still glowing, deep down in their guts, and this, my scraggly, milk-bellied kid, is what magic is.



I LISTENED TO HER STORY, AND IN MY SECRET heart I thought she smelled sweet, of blood and milk and hide, like the Mare herself, and I allowed my body to inch, ever so slightly, closer to hers. She said nothing more that night.

I grew under her frown for many years like a sleek colt, learning to find the glowing thing in my gut, to control its light and strength, to be its bridle and bit. The world moved under me like a flowing field beneath amber hooves, and I could feel the blood-light in me pulsing, its life in my body like a newborn—and I had to deliver many, my girl, both under Thurayya's direction and alone.

I exulted in it, the pooling of light in my heart. I learned to make it into medicine, and spells, and charms, to push it out of me and fashion it into shapes. How many nights did I spend with her under the lightning and the black clouds, her hair streaming like frenzied serpents, her thin arms extended towards the raging sky? I learned without the light, too: the way of animals, and the way of the steppes. I learned how to deliver a colt who has become strangled in its mother's womb, and how to catch and milk the shaggy cattle that chewed the prairie grass. The time went quickly, when I was young, and I loved my mistress, and there was so much yet to know.

But one night Thurayya came to me and the moon crowned her with silver and black.

"Bent-Bow," she hissed, "goat-of-my-heart. You must come with me now. For once in your life, do not question me."

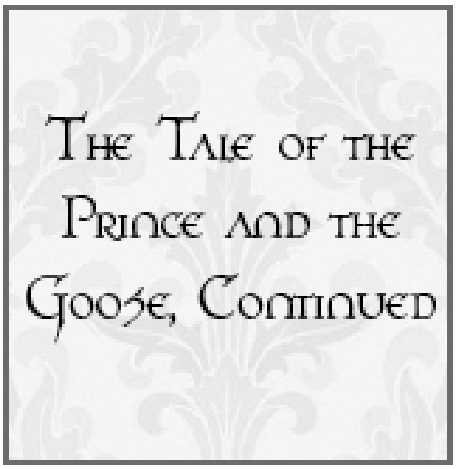
I opened, thought better of it, and closed my ever-busy mouth, to take my pack and follow the thin shape of the witch away over a long meadow which bordered the village. Her form swayed ahead of me, blurred, as the miles we crossed began to carry me into a half-dream, the sky and the cutting winter air skimming along past my cheeks.

After some time we approached a monstrous cliff, rising up like a great bear ahead of us. She drew me up next to her and embraced me, a thing she had never done. When she pulled away her craggy face was wet with tears.

"You have been my best student. I am proud of you. But I cannot go with you tonight. I have never done this thing—it is not my right. It belongs only to you, and had there been any woman of your family left to bring you here, we would never have met. After tonight, if you come back to the village, it will be the end of your time with me. You will be a full well: enough silver water within you to return to your own people and ladle it out to them, to guide them, and teach them. The rest of your education will be the private learning women like us work for all our days, when you will become both teacher and student, mistress and apprentice. You will return pregnant with knowledge to bear to your tribe, and your power will grow like a child, and you will spend the rest of your life in labor. But you must pass this night first, and emerge again. Then you will be ready, my beautiful, beautiful daughter. My beautiful little goat."

She smiled brightly, her lips curving like a scimitar, and pointed to a gaping hole in the cliff wall. I kissed her cheek awkwardly, looking into her shining eyes. I was determined not to show my fear, to possess it and enter it, to dwell within it until it disappeared into my calm, quiet belly. I turned away from Thurayya, from my life with her and my youth, and entered the mouth of the cave.

Soon I could see nothing; darkness like hands pressed in on me. I made a place for myself on the cool, compact earth, listening to the slow, lazy rustle of bats far overhead. And I waited, bounded in blackness.



Knife's face was lit by the reddening sun, her nose casting shadows on her scars, her eyes deep and impenetrable as snowy mountains. Well water glistened crimson and saffron in wooden buckets that lay scattered around the house like wildflowers, reflecting the blazing sky. The Prince rested on his heels, ran his hand through thick black hair, now marshy with sweat. He started, as if out of a spell, and looked sharply at the old witch.

"Well," he blurted, "what happened then?"

The woman cackled huskily. "Then the pretty Prince came inside the hut, for it was becoming night, and kneaded dough for the terrible, ugly witch's bread."

This was nearly too much for the Prince, who had tried very hard to keep his dignity thus far. To now work in this deformity's kitchen like a scullery maid? Leander of the Eight Kingdoms, the Two-Blooded Border-Lord, Son of Helia the Radiant, would absolutely not bake filthy, thin peasant's bread in this wretched place. He had promised to serve her, yes, but he had meant to do so in some manly fashion which involved the slaying of some things and the rescuing of others. Bread needed to be neither slain nor rescued.

He opened his noble mouth to say so, but the chill stare of the witch stopped his words like a noose about his neck. Her teeth gleamed horribly bright under cracked lips, and seemed to lengthen and twist into clashing ivory knives. In a moment the vision had evaporated, but the Prince was now convinced that

bread-baking was a most estimable and agreeable work, and that perhaps kneading was not too dissimilar to slaying.

Though he had to duck to enter the hut, it was more comfortable and spacious inside than he could have expected, a fire licking at gnarled hawthorn logs in one corner, bound books lining the walls. Knife turned as he removed his fine leather boots.

"Excuse the doorway. My people have always been small."



Bundles of dried herbs and once-bright flowers hung like stalactites from racks on her ceiling; gray, red, brown. He saw withered peach blossoms, dusty lupines, roses and bundles of mushrooms like roses, angelica and buckbean and bladderwrack, coltsfoot, rue, and mallow—and there his knowledge of botany, with its princely limitations, failed him. Glinting black furs covered the floor like autumn leaves. Great terra-cotta jars and mystifying chests with copper and silver locks, innumerable walking sticks of every material, and bolts of strange, deeply hued fabric were strewn about the borders of the wide central room, and a massive table of shimmering wood dominated the area near the fire. It was, all in all, everything he had been led to expect from a witch's house.

On the table were heaps of inchoate dough and ceramic pots of fragrant spices. The witch gestured towards it and a low chair. She turned to a large iron stove, her muscled back obscuring whatever task lay unfinished on its steaming surface. There was a long silence, stroked by the soft, slushing sounds

of the Prince's hand slowly, awkwardly pounding dough—for he kept his wounded fist at his side, so that his seeping blood would not stain the loaf. The pain had nearly left the stumps of his fingers. After a time, Knife looked up from the stove, shaking her gray hair like a foal, and spoke into the rough-hewn wall.

"You have your mother's hair, you know, all those long curls like strips of bark. Not the color of course, but the heft of it." Her voice was rough and pained. The Witch turned from her work and moved to the table with two clay cups of steaming greenish-yellow tea.

"Willow bark and wild mint," she grunted, picking at the woodgrain, her face caught and silhouetted by the firelight. "And a bit of her eyes, though your father is there, too, black, reflecting nothing."

The Prince's breath stopped, and words rushed to his lips only to die strangled on his tongue. His whole body seemed to struggle with itself, until suddenly he was crying softly, salting the bread, his young shoulders shuddering.

"Please," he begged, "how can you know anything of my mother? No—do not tell me, do not speak of her. Never speak of her." He dried his eyes with the dirty cuff of his sleeve. "Tell me what happened to your grandmother in the cave, tell me old Star-tales no one believes anymore, but do not ask me to remember my mother."

The Witch swallowed her tea.

"In the cell, Grandmother rubbed at her temples and drank a little of the polluted water left us in a decrepit iron jug. I waited patiently, still a good student. At length, she began again…"



It was dark, of course. These sorts of things always begin in the dark. I leaned with my back against the rock wall, feeling the slight damp, the thick air of that stone womb which was blacker than black.

Ages passed. Or minutes.

I looked into the shadows, their substance, their limbs, their weight. At times, I felt at peace and watchful, as though I sat on the giant lip of a blue-black lily, its fat flesh curling underneath me, so perfect that no part of me could not be a part of it, and my body was changed, converted into its charcoal and gloam. At other times, I felt cold and alone and very small. But I felt the tiny, struggling light inside me, and it was warm as a fire at my feet. It spread through me as though I was a sieve of silk, left me clean and pure in that silent cavern. I sat with palms upturned, trying to hold the curve of darkness like a great hanging belly, thunder-black and written upon with swarthy symbols, all alive and breathing and swirling in the violet long-past-sunset.

I think I must have nearly fallen asleep, when suddenly my flesh sparked and shivered, and a thing began to coalesce out of the hematite air. I could not, at first, see anything at all but a length of deeper black amid the blackness. Its edges seemed to shimmer with light, a heat lightning crisping the edges of a shape, glowing like an afterimage. I was afraid, granddaughter, of course I was afraid. I cowered into the curve of the cavern, shaking like a newborn fawn.

At length I perceived a long head and flowing hair, luminous eyes round as moons. It seemed a part of the stone, a part of the night, a part of nothing I had

ever come near to knowing. My eyes rolled in my head and sweat slicked my skin. My heart beat so fast I felt as though I had swallowed a hummingbird.

Finally, the outlines of the shape, rimmed in white fire, became clear and distinct.

In a moment it was utterly familiar to me, the long curve of black neck, the smooth haunches and velvet fur, a thick tail in a hundred braids brushing the cave floor, breath puffing from her great nostrils like pipe smoke: a horse beyond fantasies of horses, beyond any guess at size or hope of beauty, her ears seeming to brush the ceiling like stiff feathers, their twitchings carving some arcane verse on the rock. Scattered around her hooves lay charred jawbones and shoulder blades, and sternums like scepters.

The Mare watched me calmly, snorting occasionally and blinking her incandescent eyes. There was no sound for a space that seemed like a thousand winters joined at the snowline.

I still could not say where the courage came from, from what hidden place in me it sprung up and gurgled brightly, but I stood on clamoring legs and reached out my little hand to the creature, avoiding the rattling bones in their protective ring. I stroked her nose and the sides of her lightless face—and granddaughter, I cannot even now describe the softness of her flesh, the gentle glide of my hand over her thick, gleaming fur. Her skin was the texture of new cream, the shade of a crow flying high in a moonless night. She was beautiful and terrifying, savage and pure. Her eyes wheeled like suns and her great heart thundered against me. I buried my face in her mane and breathed the scent of wild earth and a burning sky. There was no other world but her.





And suddenly, without warning, that great head turned like an opening door and the black Mare bit into the flesh of my shoulder with blazing teeth, tearing muscle from bone. I screamed uselessly into the echoes, and blood surged from the wound like a river through a red canyon, gushing warmly onto my breasts and hands. I flailed against her, beating her flank with my fists, but the teeth only ground harder into me. I think I must have fainted then, and as I fell against her body I expected nothing but death.

When I came around I lay once more against the rock wall, drenched in my own blood as though I had been caught in a rainstorm. The Mare had disappeared. I wept bitterly—though she had sunk her teeth in me I missed them, I felt empty without their light burning into me. She had done no more than she had always done—chewed a hole in flesh. And the edges of her hole longed for her, after she was gone. Her absence filled the chamber like a voice.

In her place was a much smaller creature, not at all commanding or terrible, sitting on its haunches, eyes sparking in the returned blackness. When it saw I had revived, it padded across the earthen floor and stood directly in front of my face; a handsome red Fox with a splendid furry tail. He smelled of burnt grass and copper filings, and his fur crackled with a baleful kind of rusted light.

To my surprise, he bent his inquisitive head and began licking the blood from my wound. He closed his polished eyes as he worked, long, rough passes with his pink tongue, prickling and horribly painful. I bit my lip and did not whimper, though the brush of his fur against my tortured skin was agony. Slowly the scarlet ebbed from the pale. But he was not finished with me. The little Fox opened his mouth and spoke quite clearly.

"Press some of the goldenseal and dandelion root from your pack into the wound, then use bay leaves to bind the poultice. It will help. But it is important that you do not stop the blood flow entirely. My mother has prepared you, but you will need the blood of your body."

I obeyed numbly. When I had finished, the Fox bent to sniff at my shoulder and check my work. I watched him carefully, and as he inclined his head I lashed out and gripped his bristling throat in my fist. Through his struggles against my strong hands and his snapping snout trying to reach me, I hissed at him through my own sharp teeth.

"Now, tell me what is going on here, Fox, or I shall have you skinned and in my pack with the bay and the dandelion faster than a lion can swallow a mouse."

The Fox snorted and sputtered like a petulant child, and after some sniffling and snorting, and after realizing I would not let his neck out of my hands, replied with injured dignity:

"You, little *girl,* are not supposed to *touch* me, you are not supposed to *assault* me or ask me *questions*. It is not *done*. But you touched the Mare, and that too is forbidden. I can only hope the pain of her bite was extreme. That she endured your hands on her! Filthy! They are so dirty, you are so dirty and dark, and you touched her, you touched me!"

I let him go carefully, moving backwards from his furious form as he rubbed his nose and his throat and washed his fur with desperate strokes of a pink tongue. I smiled with what I assumed was bravery and nodded with what I imagined to be a casual air. "Fox, I think I have been good, and suffered quite enough to know what is happening to me in this place."

The Fox hooted in derision, a strange noise coming from his delicate russet snout.

"Oh, you think you have been *good,* do you? You think you have *suffered*? You know nothing at all, stupid as a goat." He drew himself up on his haunches. "I am the Servant of the Black Mare. That was my mother you *fondled,* wicked child. She who invented words, and yet does not speak; she who brings dreams and visions, yet does not sleep; she who swallows the storm, yet knows nothing of rain or wind. I speak for her; I am her *own*. This was not your test, human child; that lies beyond. Pain is no test. In my mind you have already failed; you dared touch her who carries the Moon in her Belly, who foaled the Stars in the Beginning of the World. But she allowed your unclean hands on her, and still blessed you with her sacred Teeth, so there must be something in you which was born in her."

The Fox pawed the earth fretfully, imploring me with his eyes. "*Why* did you do it? Why did you have to *stroke* her as though she were your mount, your little pet? Oh mother mine, would you have *ridden* her? Even… even *I* have never been permitted to touch her, in all my years of service, never *once*… Terrible child, why could you not have kept your hands to yourself?"

The Fox trotted towards me again. In a crimson flash he cruelly raked his claws across my left breast, splitting the flesh like a ripe plum. I could have sworn there were tears in his little black eyes, catching in his golden fur and whiskers.

"There," he snarled, "that is for your trespass; that is *my* mark. I am the Servant! I walk alongside the Mare; I have drunk her milk and hunted with her! I chewed the tiny Grass-Stars in their hundreds and thousands by her side! And I will not heal *that* one for you!"

I breathed hard, genuinely afraid now of the little animal, his hackles high, both of us panting in the dark. I clasped a hand over my new wound, blood dripping through the sieve of my fingers. The Fox seemed to compose himself, his fur returning to its usual sleekness.

"I have wasted half your time already, idiot girl." His eyes glazed over, retreating into ritual. "But you will not pass your tests, so it hardly matters. Go further in, filth-child, into the second chamber, which is the Wolf Cave, and from there to the Cave of the Seven Sleepers. There lies your test. Pass these chambers and emerge a woman. Or die within them. Remember, pain is not a test. Knowledge is not enough. Many have gone before you, little one, and none have ever spoken of their trials. It is forbidden. You may take nothing but your own body; your pack must stay here. Go, with the blessing of the Mare, and acquit yourself as well as a brat like you can."

With that, the Fox snapped his needle jaws once in my direction and walked towards the far end of the cavern, right through the stone wall, disappearing as though he never was. I was still bleeding, and though a few of the leaves and powders from my pack helped, there was a dark stain on my dress. I smoothed my hair and stood, firmer now, looking for the entrance into the second chamber. And of course, where the Fox had vanished with a flourish of his beautiful tail, there was now a small hole low in the rock, the color of fresh

blood, hardly big enough for me to squeeze through. I walked towards it, trying to tell myself that I was at ease, serene as the moon on a crane's feathers.

The girl closed her large eyes as she spoke, so that her eyelids and their mosaic covering seemed to float like black lilies in the paleness of her face. Frogs sent emerald notes up into the air, and owls sang in low gleaming strands, resting in black branches, veiled in the violet breath of jacaranda flowers. Under their harmonics, her voice sighed back and forth. The girl drank from the wine flask, running her fingers over its engraved surface. The wind rustled her hair like petals on a lake.

Even though they had rested, as she spoke the boy had again drifted into a shallow sleep, and the story's words wove in and out of his mind like a needle drawing silken thread. His head lay on the girl's lap, and she stroked his soft black hair as she continued, at first timidly, then with a growing tenderness. The stars overhead burned like court candles. The moon was high, full as a blown sail, riding softly through the rolling blue clouds, cutting through their foamy sapphirine flesh with a glowing prow. Shadows fell in long minarets on the gardens, the courtyards, the lemon trees and olive, the acacias and the climbing vines, the bone white lilies and the sleeping Palace. The girl's voice was like river rushes rubbing together in a warm wind, winding through the cobbled paths.



I CROUCHED AND WRIGGLED INTO THE HOLE, into the slick rock, which became mud as quickly as ice becomes water. On my belly I dug into the earth like a worm—I could barely breathe for the dripping dirt; I could barely move for the press of the slippery cave. I told myself I was not afraid of dirt, dirt is dirt, and holes always empty out somewhere. I told myself that while dirt which was only dirt slithered into my mouth and my nose and my eyes, and all I could taste was earth, and I could see nothing at all.

But I emerged—you always emerge, eventually—on the other side, into another cavern with another earthen floor. It was too dark to see the other side, the rock walls narrowing upwards into a skinny crack through which I could see the cascading moonlight and hear the fall of a soft rain somewhere in the distance.

I should have known, I should have known from the moment my foot touched the cave floor. I could hear a storm terribly far off, the drip of water off thick pine needles and the drinking grasses, the sucking mushrooms, the soggy moss. It rang in my ears like bells on a horse's saddle, the silver, slight glistening of rain on fat green leaves, and the slippery smell of damp, rotting flowers. But the haunch of sky I saw through the opening in the cave-roof showed a clear night, full of hard, bright stars.

The rain fell in some place so far off that it did not even disturb the air above me. But my ears and my nose struck on it, like a blade sparking under a hammer. I trotted quickly around the dim room, examining and investigating,

trying to sniff out the test before it leapt out at me. I should have known—but it felt so natural to press a wet nose into the corners of the rock, to canter and bristle and snap my jaws together in the dark.

I looked for a second door, but there was nothing, though one side of the rock face was curiously polished, a deep amber color that reflected the room and the moonlight—and me. I saw a flash of gray and white as I passed it, and stopped suddenly, my heart spinning around in my throat. I saw my image in the stone.

Staring dumbfounded at me from the shining cave wall was a very large and very handsome gray wolf. Great shaggy ears twitched, and my tongue lolled between frighteningly fierce teeth. My eyes sparkled black and my fur was the shade of shadows cast on water by the moon, starry-white and silver, every shimmer of silver from stone to snow, glossy and pale over powerful legs, down to the tip of my extremely long and proud tail, which I thumped grandly on the earthen floor.

All in all, my granddaughter, I looked very fine. I howled just to hear it, bouncing off the walls like an arrow of green wood. It was so loud I jumped at my own voice. Yet I was still alone in the room. I trotted back and forth as though I had never had to manage with only two legs. Nothing was more natural than my new loping gait, the balance of my tail, the catch of my claws on hidden roots and rocks. I padded around on my new paws, the quick thud of them quickly replacing the ridiculous idea that I had ever been a girl and slept in a soft bed. My thoughts became wolfish, itching to be released into the night to hunt and run with these strong limbs over the fields. My heart was flooded with the memory of bounding through feathery snow with my pack, nursing my beautiful gray pups in a warm den, tracking hares and deer over green mountains, prowling through farms filled with fat pigs and helpless spring lambs; wordless and fierce, without the endless sweeping of huts and hearths. But then—what is a hut? What is a hearth? It became terribly difficult even to remember my name, and then to remember that I had one, and then to remember what a name was. It was like going to sleep, covering myself in a warm blanket which was a body, and I was so tired, you know, so tired.

You must understand, Knife-of-my-heart, how the thing that changed me takes the mind as well as the body, how it swallows up everything into itself.

But as that night seemed to trickle by and nothing at all happened, I curled into a ball of gleaming fur in the center of the cave and fell asleep, lost in the blackness of endless night and dreams of hunting and eating, always eating.

Looking back now, I think I hardly slept at all—wolves don't need a night's full sack of sleep. I startled awake though there was no sound to disturb me, and saw three tall figures standing a polite distance away.

The first was a white wolf with sloping ears and gentle eyes the color of rain, her fur gleaming nearly blue, like the new moon on snowy branches. Her tail waved slowly behind her, a stream of ice, drawing patterns in the soil.

The second was black as midwinter's night, his eyes of storm clouds cut with lightning, fur thick and dark as the depths of a mountain lake.

The third was every shade of gold as I was every shade of silver, from the white of flame to deep bronze, flowing and braiding together like liquid fire. Her eyes were the same flickering color, leaping and sparking.

My mouth was horribly dry and I could not swallow. It took all of my newfound wolfness not to bolt from their terrible faces. I struggled and grasped for my reason, my girl-self in the mounds and layers of wolf. They spoke then in unison, their muzzles shaping the words strangely, but beautifully, a growling gentleness.

"Welcome, little dog. Which of us will you have?"

I tried to speak, but it was impossible. I stuttered and gasped and yelped, trying to form words out of my silky muzzle and dagger-teeth. My silver brow furrowed with the effort.

"Child," the white one said, her voice was the wind off the mountains, welcoming and sweet, "you must choose. If you cannot manage to speak, you may simply come to one of us, and touch our fur with your nose. We are wolves, after all; we do not overvalue speech."

"She doesn't understand, sister." The black one interrupted, his words like saplings felled by bronze axes. He turned to me with brittle, proud eyes, and spoke slowly, as if to a very stupid and stubborn horse. "A guide, little dog. You have to choose one of us as your guide. You *must* know how these things are done." The black beast snorted, clearly too bored to continue.

I looked at them, tall and terrible, the white and the black. And the third, the soft and rippling gold one, who had not spoken, but whose tail swayed lazily

from side to side, her calm eyes like jeweled moons. I padded over to her and pressed my wet nose into her neck like a field of daffodils. Her fur smelled good, and sweet, which was all I could think of—that she smelled right, and smelling, after all, is everything. I could swear she smiled at me. And when I pulled back from her warm-smelling body, the other two had gone. She looked at me with eyes like the spaces in a honeycomb, and glanced away past me, where her pack-mates had gone.

"We got so lost, you know," she whispered.

I didn't understand—how could I begin to guess?—but I pushed my snout up under hers reassuringly, and shut my eyes, washed in her smell. She growled deep in her throat, though not a threat-growl, a soft pup-growl that rattled in my bones.

"We never meant to get so lost…"





In the first days, when we came walking over the first grass, we burned it, no matter how lightly we tried to step. It went up in long white rows of flame, and even we were afraid of it, afraid of what we could do to this place. We tried to walk on stone only—mute, dead stone, you understand, and mute, dead grass, not the living blade and rock that—oh, it doesn't matter. Our feet killed it, whatever we touched, and we huddled in fear of the fires that we couldn't stop.

But whether the grass got stronger or we got weaker, it was not long before we just left scorch marks. Black and ugly, yes, but there were no more holocausts in our tracks, and we began to explore the world that the Mare had left for us when she left the sky.

I was as young as we all were. We named everything; we named ourselves. The Bee-Star, which was so bright and small and happier than any of us—that little sun yellow speck who never had to kill grass or stone just to walk from one place to another—called me Liulfr, and whenever he buzzed around my ears I heard the whirr of my name in his wings.

It was more confused than you might think. There were so many of us—but so many more of them. The Mare's real children were so much wilder and more numerous than we were, the ones that came flying out of her body still clung with moon-grease and sky-spittle. We were just holes, after all, holes filled up with light, and deep in our secret hearts we worried that we were an accident, nothing more than puddles who stood up and gave each other names,

and the lightless creatures which could walk (so easily, so easily!) were the only things that were meant to be born.

So we watched them; we followed them and tried to imitate them. Some of them looked like some of us—holes in the shapes of men and holes in the shapes of animals and holes in the shapes of plants and tools and stones—and naturally we clung to those that seemed most like us; but above all things we tried to imitate men and women, who seemed the most *intended* of all the things that came out of the Mare, who came out speaking and naming and plowing and stomping, just as we had.

But they were afraid of us, of how we burned, and how we set to flame what they thought was good and beautiful. They called us ghosts and worse, but we couldn't leave them—they had been inside the Mare, after all, and we had never known that, never known what she looked like from under rib and heart. We wanted to know; we wanted, in her absence, to love what had been part of her.

And yes, we saw our light passing into them, into the men and the plants and the tools and the stones, and many of us left then, went into conclaves of like-with-like, Rose-Stars with Bee-Stars and Worm-Stars with Snail-Stars, determined to keep safe and whole.

But some of us, like whipped dogs following behind a cruel master, kept near people, and tried to look like them, for we had discovered, just as they had discovered how to seed a field and leave one part fallow, that just because we had been chewed into a certain shape did not mean we had to keep it. It always hurt the first time, to shiver off the shape our mother gave us, but it got easier. It was the biggest thing we knew how to do, but we were learning.

We were just children, and we played with the world like blocks and dolls, like blocks and dolls, but our siblings did not want to play with us.

And so it was that the Manikarnika met their fate, and we learned a thing we could do that was much bigger and more terrible than changing our skin.

I would like to say I knew them, and I did, in the sense that second cousins in a large family know each other—which is to say hardly at all. They were not like me—they were Stone-Stars, while I was a Wolf-Star, and they changed to women, while after a few experiments I stubbornly kept the paws and the tail that my mother gave me.

But there is not one among us who does not know this story.

The Manikarnika were seven sisters, and when they were gnawed from the flesh of the Mare, they were Stones. Jade and Granite and Opal, Garnet and Shale and Iron Ore and little Diamond, pale as a milk-soaked paw.

They were horrified when they tried to roll and clatter on the dead stone and burned it, melted it, fused it together into glittering, molten rivers. When they learned to walk on two legs, they avoided the mountains like sickness, refusing to harm anything that was so like their first bodies. I tell you this so you will know they were gentle, that the burning was not what any of us meant—but accidents will breed accidents, you know. We couldn't help it. They couldn't help it.

After the first of us started to dim, and the first of us went into exile beyond the swamps and hills, the Manikarnika stayed. They were not jealous of their light, and were determined to show us that we could live in the world the Mare had made, that it was meant for us as well as for her true children.

To show us this, they went to the villages of men, and asked to be taken in, like beggar-women, dressed in rags and poor as empty plates. They were sure they would be welcomed, and we would see that the second litter of the Mare would call us sisters and brothers and even wives, and there would be family between the first and the last. Of course their light still spangled all around them, but who could refuse a beautiful girl who barely owned her own dress no matter how brightly she glowed? Who could refuse seven?

The first house they went to was the palace of a King—such as palaces were in those days, which is to say the large mud hut on a hill above smaller mud huts. The King sent his men to see to the commotion at his door, and they found there the bone-ragged Manikarnika: Jade and Granite and Opal with their many-colored, speckled skin, Garnet red as blushing, Shale and Iron Ore gleaming silver and bright as water, and little Diamond, small and pale and delicate as the slenderest strand of a spider's web. They clung together pitifully, and asked to be brought inside the mud-brick walls, to be fed and clothed, to be loved.

The King's men shuddered at their strange light, and bolted their wooden gates against them.

Undeterred, they went next to the cluster of small mud huts and knocked at the door of a poor widow's house. Surely, her husband dead and her children grown, she would take them in and call them daughters. The old widow opened her hidebound door and saw there the Manikarnika: Jade and Granite and Opal with their smooth, polished arms, Garnet sharp-elbowed, Shale and Iron Ore darkly glinting, and little Diamond, clear as morning. They huddled together mournfully, asking to be let in out of the cold, given soup, given warm arms and soft words.

The widow shuddered at their strange light and began to weep for all her lost ones, and in her weeping let the hidebound door fall shut against them.

But they did not give up. They went out beyond the mud huts to the mud-haired people who moved from place to place across the open steppes with wagons and horses and sleds. They went to one of the tents, unremarkable as any of the others, and called out to the young girl who lived there with her new infant. The girl opened the flap of her tent and saw there the Manikarnika: Jade and Granite and Opal cool as wind-smoothed snow, Garnet hot as sun-battered sand, Shale and Iron Ore freezing till their toes were black, and little Diamond, light and sweet as rain. They leaned one against the other, exhausted, and asked to be let in from the wild, covered in fur and given milk.

The girl laughed and said that she had plenty to spare. The sisters smiled like seven dawns breaking, and triumphant they lay down, curled together with the nomad girl on the floor of a plain tent. And they were happy, and the ground beneath them was only a little darkened with the weight of their light.

By morning, they were dead.



In the dungeon, dust and straw covered the dank floor and no slanting sliver of light crept in. There was no sound but the soft dripping of water from damp ceiling to damp floor. Scraps of unfamiliar meat and swamp brown water had been pushed under the door—I had heard nothing but my grandmother's voice. She put a withered hand on my head, stroking the thick hair with a gentleness practiced on dozens of children. I looked up at her cracked lips, her cracked face. In the deep shadow I curled into my grandmother's lap, trying to spread my meager, ragged dress over her painfully thin legs. She smiled down at me and shrugged off the cloth as though it meant nothing to her, and though her lips were split and spotted with dried blood, her face was lit like a festival lantern. I wished that I could be as brave as she was, that whatever strength she had earned in the cave had been mine, too.

I handed her the beaten jug of dirty water from near the door, trying to be happy in serving her, as I used to be. But she refused it and with hands broken and bloodied by whoever had dragged her here, she worked at the leather knots of her robe until she could peel the filthy cloth away from her shoulder. The flesh there was mangled and pitted, a long, twisting scar that punctured and poisoned her brown skin. I stared.

"So that you know what I tell you is true." She chuckled as she bound up her dress again.

"I… I didn't doubt…"

My grandmother touched my cheek lightly. “No, no, of course you didn’t. You were always a good girl. And so, you see, I have broken my promise. I disobey the Fox, and tell you all these things I was meant to keep secret as a green-eyed baby in a brown-eyed man’s house. But I have never much cared what that old red beast thought. And do you know? Now, the Mare comes to me in my dreams, and I do ride her, I ride her over the blanched steppes, with the sun gold and hot on our backs.”

She didn’t need to say it—I felt it, deep in my stomach, that the Mare would never come for me, and I would never feel that hide between my calves.

Grandmother Bent-Bow coughed like an arrow striking a tree. “Forgive me, little Knife, that I haven’t spent this time rocking you in my arms and singing the songs of our mothers. It is too important that you learn what I suffered in the cave; we both know that you will never face those tests. There is no one now to guide you to the cave-mouth, no one to kiss you and call you their best and prettiest goat. There will never be anyone to take you home when it is over, shaking and shivering in rough blankets, no one for you, and no one for the child you are carrying, as tiny within you as a mayfly on the slow river. So instead of a sweet reunion with your old grandmother, you get a lesson, and you had better learn it, and learn it well.”

My breath caught, knotted like new yarn in my dry throat. I had not even known that my belly had taken a child from the body of my husband before he died. But in that moment I knew she told the truth. I fought to keep still at her side. Shakily, I whispered, “I am listening, Grandmother. I am trying to walk with you and learn your steps.”

Her wrinkled eyelids slid closed and as she spoke they quivered, as though tiny wolves were leaping beneath her skin.



The young girl woke her camp screaming. Men came running—they opened her tent to find her huddled against her baby, sobbing, covered in light.

Light dripped from her hair, down the bridge of her nose, from the lobes of her ears. It trickled into her mouth, splashed her child's forehead, pooled sickly between her breasts. Pale and bright as the whites of a maiden's eyes, it drenched the front of her hide-dress—it spattered the walls and soaked the earthen floor of the tent into glowing, churning mud.

Around her lay seven stone bodies, and they did not glow, or shimmer, or gleam. Jade and Granite and Opal, dark and hollow as old trees, Garnet leeched and empty, Shale and Iron Ore pale as paper, and Diamond, little Diamond, nothing left of her but a cicada shell, crystalline, clear, and nothing left within her, not even dead bone.

They had come, the girl wept, in the night. The King's men who had known what had come begging at their door, known and called it strange and wicked. They had held her arms behind her while they cut open the pitiful sisters, who did not even cry out while the light was let out of them—and it sprayed from them like blood, she cried, and she tasted it as it spurted warm over her face, and it tasted of sweet water and clover. They opened the throats of the Stars and when they left, she tried to hold her hands against the wounds, but there were too many and she was not strong enough, and who among them knew how to heal a thing that is drowning in its own light which is blood which is light?

The tribe was afraid and uncertain of what to do, but they washed the light from the poor girl, and took the seven stone bodies out into a great field waving with poppies, and gave them what funeral rites they knew.

And so it was that the Stars learned that we could die, the biggest thing we could do, and those who were left vanished from the world, into the crevices and secret places of the earth, terrified as rabbits.

It was not long after that that the girl and her black-eyed baby looked into the sky through the gaps in the still-wet ceiling of her tent and saw new stars there —seven of them, clinging together like sisters.



Liulfr the Wolf- Star had not moved one of her golden muscles while she spoke. Her voice had not lifted up nor dipped down. She just stared straight ahead.

"We do not know where they go, the ones that die. Where we go. Their bodies stay here and new stars peek out of the sky, but where are *they*?"

What should I have said to comfort her?

"That girl, that poor nomad girl, had been nearly drowned in light, the light of seven bodies. She had choked on it and her baby had sputtered in it—no other thing had ever known so much. Her children and her children's children were nearly mad with it, and as time went on, they began to seek us out, though each child had less and less of the Manikarnika's sheen on them. They came and they came, predictable as tides, and now you come—granddaughter dangling at the end of so many granddaughters, one after the other like a chain of folk passing a bucket of water between them. A little more spills out whenever it changes hands." She shook her great, shaggy head. "We don't mind anymore. It is almost like having our cousins back."

The polished quartz wall in which I had first seen my wolf-self slowly melted into nothing, revealing a long tunnel into the black earth. She sighed with exhausted resignation and nudged me gently with her snout like a mother showing her pup the way to fresh water. The mingled light of our fur disappeared into the wall.

Liulfr trotted silently ahead of me, her paws steady and sure. She flickered like a brass lamp. The tunnel was longer than the other, so black that I had to stifle a yelp of despair when first I saw it. We crept on our bellies through the rock like a piece of bread stuck in a long throat, forepaws scrabbling on the soil, hind legs crouched and aching.

The throat opened into a room whose corners and rafters were washed with light, scoured with it, brighter than day, a lather of light like soap rubbed furiously in the hand. I could hardly see, the change was so sudden, and in the center of it, the wolf-creature like a sun, gently blazing.

The cavern was not empty. Seven biers were laid out in curving rows, each bearing a woman, asleep or dead, fourteen slender hands closed over fourteen frozen breasts. Their hair swept over their pedestals as though it had grown a thousand years; their limbs were covered in jewels, more than I had ever seen together, piled up like apples at harvest. Piles of jade and granite and opal, of garnet bright as blood, of shale and iron ore, and of diamond, tiny diamonds glittering like snow.

In the Garden

WAKENED NOW, THE BOY CHEWED SLOWLY ON AN APPLE CORE, MESMERIZED. Wolves bounded gracefully through his mind, nosing the wind. He stretched his long arms, yawned, and pulled from his pack a rich red blanket edged in gold thread and embroidered with lilies. He wrapped it around his shoulders and edged gingerly towards the girl, as a man would move towards a skittish colt. They huddled together under their scarlet tent, and she lowered her lashes earthward when his hand brushed her knee, snatching the water flask and drawing it in. They were very close; he could smell the musk of her hair, cedar and jasmine.

The first lights of dawn, luminous and blue, filtered down through the fine fabric of leaves, writing in rose and silver shadows on their skin.

It is very still, the world at dawn, under its glittering net of dew. In their little thicket, the pair of children who were very nearly finished with childhood sat dry and warm, and the girl's voice had fallen as silent as a cat's paw on pine needles. The infant sun brushed the boy's hair from his face with a shimmering, cherubic hand. He did not move from the girl's side, but it was nearing light, and his sister would be rising soon, her face growing stormy at the sight of his empty bed.

"I have to go," he rasped finally. "I have to get back before the household wakes up."

The girl nodded, suddenly shy, drawing back into herself after all this long night of spinning out her heart like flax, straw into gold.

“But I will come back,” he reassured her, “as the flocks of river birds do, at sunset. I will bring us another supper and you will tell me all the rest about the grandmother in her cave.”

He touched her face, and his hand on her cheek was soft as a hare’s paw. The girl smiled into his palm, and nodded. Her luminous eyes lifted and long lashes closed briefly, exposing the swirling black of the birthmark covering her eyelids, inky and deep, a night without stars. The boy marked that he did not find it un-beautiful, now that he knew her a little. He dipped his tousled golden head a little, to meet her eyes as they slid open again.

“I will come every night, to hear your stories. Every night,” he declared quietly, and ran into the striations of mist covering the gardens, catching in the jasmine and aster, and the apple trees.

The girl bent to the remains of their evening meal and gathered together the flasks and crusts of bread to feed the crows and gulls. She then rose from her little bower, shaking a few errant petals from her hair in a shower lit by the strong red-gold beams of the day.

When the sun had lain down in the west and covered itself with long blue blankets, and the girl sat cross-legged under the silver-lavender jasmine branches, she saw the boy’s eager shadow racing across the thick emerald lawn to her. He burst into her thicket, industriously setting out her dinner. She had been sure he would not come.

He brought dark bread and pale cheeses, a slice of roasted lamb and a cluster of berries bulging with juice, several small roasted potatoes, a cold green apple and a slice of chocolate, precious as myrrh.

“I thought I would leave the wine tonight, so that I do not steal off to sleep again,” he admitted bashfully, extending his water flask instead.

“No, no, it’s all right, what you brought is more than enough,” she assured him with a nervous laugh. They fussed with the food and did not speak, the boy as eager for her tale as a bear seeking salmon in the frothing river. As she ate, her face grew brighter, as though she were a small sun, rising just as the great golden one went down.

“How did you live all these years in the Garden?” The boy munched on a fat chunk of apple.

The girl looked around. “The Sultan has more than enough fruit trees to feed one child, and the water in the fountains is clear and clean. I have had enough. The Palace throws away more than I could ever use. Once in a while there is even an amira’s old dress tossed on the refuse pile. And when the winters have been harsh, the birds have brought me mice and rabbits. I am cared for. The Garden raised me; it is my mother and my father, and mothers and fathers always find a way to feed and clothe their children.”

“The birds…?” The boy was incredulous.

She shrugged. “All creatures are lonely. They are drawn to me and I am drawn to them, and we warm each other in the snow. You should know better —weren’t you drawn, too? And I feed you my stories like morsels of meat roasted in a fire.”

The boy blushed deeply, turning his eyes away from her. They finished their meal in silence.

Finally, when lamb and fruit had been eaten, sweet water had been drunk, and each of them had found a comfortable place in the flower thicket to lean on their sides, heads bent inwards like conspirators, the girl spoke, and her voice filled up the boy like cream splashing in a silver bowl.



From the long, unmoving shadows beyond the last of the seven bodies, my silent guide made a small, rustling sound with her beautiful tail.

"We brought them back here, from the field of poppies and old, sodden wheat. They weighed nothing at all, like carrying moths. And we kept them here, where my dark brother and my pale sister and some few others came to hide ourselves. What else was there to do? There are no graveyards for us, no rites, no songs, no fires. We had their shells in our hands, and we didn't know what to do, we just didn't know." Liulfr nosed the faceted face of the one buried in diamonds. Her voice was a whisper thick as wet wool. "The new stars up there, the stars that flare up when we die, they're just markers. It's not them. This isn't them. We don't know where they are. You look up into the sky, little girl: it's a mausoleum, and those new, bright lights are tombs, but *they* are not there. But they are not here, either."

The Wolf-Star fixed me with her yellow eyes. I padded quietly across the room and sat down heavily before the jewel-girl, pale and dead. I was not sure what was expected of me. It was very warm, the light rubbing against my hindquarters and nuzzling my fur lazily. The glassy wound at the diamond-woman's throat seemed to grow in my vision, like a second mouth grinning horribly below the first. I nosed at it and it was neither warm nor cold, but hard, nothing like flesh.

Beneath my silver fur the wound the Mare had made throbbed, and the smaller cut from the Fox just below it stung like the quick needle of a wasp.

Liulfr simply watched me, offering no help at all. This, then, was my test. I got to my paws and half climbed over the poor girl, half kneeled on her slippery drift of gems. I put my muzzle to my chest and gnawed open the space between the wounds, so that the scabs broke and they flowed freely into each other, one long, deep gash: a hole chewed in flesh, the first bite of the world.

The blood came dark and ugly at first, and I was dizzy—dizzy and so hot in that close, dark room!—and it splashed on the empty corpse like ink spilled over a mirror. But after a long while it began to flow clear, and then filled with a gentle light, soft and sweet-smelling as sugared pears in a copper dish, cold, so cold, and the color of the moon. Half faint, I wearily pressed my bleeding breast hard against the woman's cut throat.

I thought she would wake up. I really did. I thought that all in a rush she would gasp and cry out, her back would arch like a drawn bow, her eyes would suddenly open, and she would cough. She would draw ragged breaths, and all those diamonds would clatter to the floor as she finally bolted upright, face beaming bright as morning.

She did not move. The light trickled out of me and into her, and I watched it foam at the bottom of her back, like a cup of water tossed into a deep bathtub. The shadows draped the room, and the blood which was light slowed and stopped.

Gently, with all the weight of breath, the dead woman on the bier closed her fingers over my paw.

That was all—she did not open her eyes or sit up and ask for water. Four fingers just lifted and fell again, closing me in a grip which stone might envy.

The Wolf-Star leaned over us. "We always hope—it would be an answer, anyway. But they never wake up. I suppose after all this time it would be strange if they did." Liulfr closed her eyes and began to wash me, to clean my wound in the wolfish way, with her long tongue, rough as marsh sand. With each stroke my body pulsed, vibrating under her like a plucked harp. I could see only her golden fur, shimmering candle-wise, though I could feel the Stone-Star's fingers on my fur, cold and lifeless. She lapped up the light like milk, slurping at it, sucking it from the gash in the Manikarnika, carefully collecting every drop.

Finally, she closed her long, silky snout over my shaggy breast, gripping my chest in her jaws and pinning me to the diamond girl, teeth pressing my ragged skin.

I could feel it, rushing all through me like a burst wine barrel, the light and blood that poured out of her jaws, finding its circuit in me, doubled back brighter and harsher and more terrible than before, searching out a wave to ride into my bones and belly, great, rolling tides that filled me up like a water-horn. I was glutted with it, light from the Wolf's mouth and the jewel's body, the jewel's body and mine, light old and unspeakable as the sky. I choked, moaned, even screamed emptily into the cavern as they pushed it through me —for this is *work,* granddaughter, the change of light; it is pushing a boulder up a mountain, or a mountain up a mountain. She opened and filled and sewed and opened me again. And how many hours I lay helpless and quivering between them I cannot say. They took the dim, whittled light I had in me and returned it to me, blazing like nothing I had ever known.

When finally I felt the Wolf's jaw release me, I started as if out of a dream, every pore thrumming, open, shaking. I was a woman again, I could feel it: five fingers on each hand, teeth flat and thick, long hair grazing my waist like a paintbrush.

Liulfr touched my face with her wet nose. "What we have given you is yours, but it does not belong to you. We don't mind it, we have never minded, but light is a thing with limits. You must understand that when a Star gives it she is diminished." She shut her eyes against my cheek. "I have been here for you and your mothers for a long time; I am the source you come to; I am the well from which you drink."

For the first time, the Star seemed to me to be less bright than the cave walls. She was just an old wolf, her fur bare in patches, her eyes milky and misted, her muzzle going gray. But then she smiled, as much as a wolf can smile, and I was once more surrounded by her light and warmth, which was—was it? I could not tell—only a little less than it had been before.

"You changed when you entered the cave. We did it for you then. It is a great magic, almost," and here she paused, stealing a glance at the woman with colorless curls, "the greatest of all. Metamorphosis is the most profound of all acts. When your light comes from our hands, and not from your grandparents

and their grandparents back and back and back, to that poor girl in her tent clutching a baby to her breast, you can be like us, at least a little like us, and it is only a simple thing to change the outline of a hole." The Wolf-Star swallowed hard. "After all, a hole is nothing but space." After a silence deeper than a dungeon, she stood back, straight-spined, and stared down at me, speaking carefully through her silky muzzle.

"But you are not one of us. For you, this thing is irreversible except by death, and not only the flesh is altered. Only the strongest of you can resist the collapse of the soul into the form; the mind is lazy, it naturally imitates the body. I have known none of you yet who can remain human when they wear another skin. But the thing is yours to do, if you should wish to do it."

The cold, clear hand of the jewel-girl released mine, and it had all the life of a scrap of paper blowing across an empty street. Without a word, the old gold-pelted Wolf led me back through the two doors and into the great open arena of the first cavern. It seemed a century ago that I had bent under the Mare's teeth there, that she had made her hole in me.

"Go, Star-daughter. There is much work for you to do."

I knew I should not, but I could not keep myself from it. I knelt and put my arms around her great, shaggy neck, burying my face in the smell of her, of cedar and wet rock, of snow just fallen. "You never know," I whispered, "maybe the new Stars aren't just markers. Maybe they *are* the Manikarnika. Maybe they went home."

Liulfr shook her head against my skin, and the fur was like the crackle of heat-lightning. Her voice was tiny and soft. "No one goes home. A hole is nothing but space. We are accidents, and there is no grace for us."

She pulled back and gave my cheek the briefest of licks. The Wolf-Star padded quietly away from me, vanishing before she found the far wall.

Stumbling out into the lightening world, my eyes stung by the first darts of sunlight, I sat heavily on the grass, exhaustion slamming into me like a stone wall.

And the Fox stood a few feet from me, watching me with cold eyes.

"Some who deserve failure do not achieve it," he sniffed. "Some who deserve nothing are given the world. So, here it is, woman. The world. Go into it, but do not ever speak of what has passed here. It is forbidden to all with tongues to

utter it. We want to stay hidden; we have chosen this place, and power granted can be lost. Do not think you have seen the last of me, nor ever that you are now my equal. Liulfr is hopeless and old. A filled hole is *not* empty space, and we were all full, so full of light. You are a thief and a vampire, and if I had my way you and your daughters would have no more of our blood."

As the sun crept on lion's feet over the green hills, it illuminated his fur, bristle by bristle, until he was so bright I could not look. And then he was gone, and the light shone through the place where he had been.

Out of the Garden

When midnight lay over the two children like a seraph's blue arm, the boy gingerly laid his head on the girl's lap, letting her voice cradle him. He pretended he did not hear her breath stop when he shifted, or the quaver in her voice like a single mislaid thread in a beaded gown.

But as soon as his head touched the rough fabric of her dress, a terrible crunching sound was heard as strange feet trampled the earth outside their little thicket. The girl screamed, an awful, high-pitched sound like a crane shot through with a silver arrow. The boy leapt up, drawing his pathetic little dagger, determined to protect his secret prize. But as ghostly hands ripped apart the sweet-smelling briars, he recognized that the danger was far worse than any witch or arcane spell.

The boy saw, framed in jasmine boughs like a fiery mandala, the wrathful face of his sister, her eyes filling with accusations like a judge's scroll.

"I've caught you now, you vile little rat!" she crowed triumphantly. "You'll be punished! Consorting with the demon girl!"

"She's not a demon!" he blurted, not at all meaning to—Dinarzad was fearful as a lion in heat. The girl breathed quick and hoarse, unable to move. "She's not! You leave us alone!"

Something of the wolf and the cave must have seeped into him, like spilled ink, for he never before had had the courage to say such a thing to her. Dinarzad swooped into the thicket like a crazed harpy—the boy could almost imagine feathers puffing from her skin—and seized him by the hair, dragging

him away from the now weeping girl though he kicked and cursed like a grown man.

In his vision, the girl retreated, a moon slipping behind cobaltrimmed clouds. The light was draining from his world; all he could see was her eyes, huge and dark as forest owls, staring after him.

When they reached the gates of the Garden, the boy bit his sister savagely on her perfumed arm and she stopped, slapping him hard across the face—so hard it split his lip like a pine branch. He spat blood onto the earth.

"You may think you are a man now, little brother, but men do not go near wicked devils like her. Do you want to bring her curse on the whole family? You spoiled little whelp! I'll whip you till morning!"

Defiant as a rooster crowing at sunset, the boy bellowed back, "Yes! Yes! I *am* a whelp! I am a wolf with teeth like pirates' swords and I'll tear you into as many pieces as there are jewels in the Sultan's vaults! She is not a demon—and I am going back to her. Right now." He crossed his arms over his young chest and felt pride surging in him like the Star's blood.

But Dinarzad blazed. Her eyes grew dark as molded dungeons and she gripped his arm, tightening slowly.

"No, little brother. You are not going anywhere."

The boy woke in a dark, foul-smelling prison.

Dinarzad held a child in each arm, twins bawling their identical hearts out. He was trapped with her in the royal nursery, amid the tortured cries of dozens of infants, more terrible than horned demons at their forges.

Dinarzad, almost a woman grown and ready to be married out of the household, spent her evenings caring for the Palace children, and she ruled them all with a fist stronger than any iron smelted by mortal man. She was a vengeful goddess and her will was absolute. Tonight she was tending the youngest, and for his trespass the boy was tied to her skirts and this wretched room. It was worse, he was certain, than any old dungeon in a King's castle, and there was no hope of escape as long as his sister's eyes were fastened on him like scorpion's pincers.

But the gods are not always unkind to small boys, and fate was to intervene in the pink flesh of a colicky princeling. Not yet understanding its royal duty, the poor thing simply insisted on his mother's arms. Thus Dinarzad was compelled to deliver the squalling child to the appropriate bedroom.

"If you so much as move a toe from one flagstone to the next," she warned, "I will lock you away until you rot. One brother will not be missed amid the dozens."

And with that, she swept out the door, rose-colored silks trailing behind her.

Of course, the boy had disappeared out the north window within three heartbeats.

The bower looked as though a battle had been fought there, pitch tossed from battlements and soldiers in formation crushing all underfoot. The white blossoms were in tatters, hanging like peasants' rags on snapped boughs. Their supper had been strewn everywhere, and he saw that he had dented his water flask against a gnarled root when Dinarzad had snatched him away. The ruin of the flowers touched him most, the oleander torn petal from petal, scattered onto the dirt. The place where he had heard tales that still burned like lamp oil inside him was destroyed, ransacked like a fine house.

And the girl was nowhere in sight.

He searched over all the hiding places he knew in the vast Garden, through the hedges and rose trees, the lily ponds with their ululating bullfrogs, the olive groves and the borders of the fruit orchards. She was gone, disappeared, and all the stories with her.

The boy sat down heavily on the rim of a bronze fountain, whose water trickled gently into the night. He put his golden head in his hands, reproaching himself for lack of care, that he had let himself be caught, found missing. He was an impossible thief and even more hopeless protector. But then, he thought to himself, Prince Leander was also caught, so perhaps he could be forgiven.

He looked up in his despair, and the moon floated through his sight like a great paper lantern. And as the clouds passed over it, a single wild goose arced over its vast face, tracing a graceful path in the night. He heard it call, lonely and foreign, like a jade flute, and sighed deeply.



The goose sounded again, this time very near him, and the boy realized that it was no bird which called to him, but the dark-eyed girl, who was hiding behind a slender young cedar not far away. His heart flew upward like a duck taking flight from a still pond, and he ran to her, stopping just short of clasping her in his young arms. She looked bashful and embarrassed, her black eyes downcast.

"How did you learn to call like the wild water birds?" he asked eagerly.

"I told you. I have fed them and talked with them since I was a child—there was no one else. They… sometimes they spread their wings over me on winter nights when it is very cold, and we rest together under the hard stars."

The boy again resisted the urge to embrace her, and instead clapped her on the shoulder as he had seen his father do with his comrades.

"You told me, but how could I believe it? Someday you must teach me!" he announced. "But first, the story! Continue the story! I must know what happened to the Prince now that the Witch has finished her tale!"

The two stole away from the fountain, which was, after all, a poor hiding place. They ducked into a grove of sweet-scented cedars and the girl settled in.

She smiled up at him, a strange, feline grin.

"You are wrong, though. The Witch had hardly begun…"



Grandmother folded her arms like an old stick-bug, smiling her thin smile and stroking my hair. I still remember her voice, and how it wrapped around that dark cellar, clawing at the walls and licking into the massive locks at the same time that it softened my fear like a spinner wetting thread between her lips.

"So you can change like that, even now? Right now?"

"Yes, I could."

"Could I do it?"

"You will never go to the cave now, my love. You will never touch the light inside Liulfr, or inside the dead Star. You will be a witch of leaves and grasses, at best: you will make love-potions and cold-cures and gout-softeners for those who can pay you, and look up at the sky, and tell a young girl whether her husband will have light or dark hair, and deliver her baby when the time is right for it, and you will bury her when the time is right for that, but that is all."

I swallowed that, chewing on it like a strip of hide. Finally, I grunted. A weak witch was better than no witch at all.

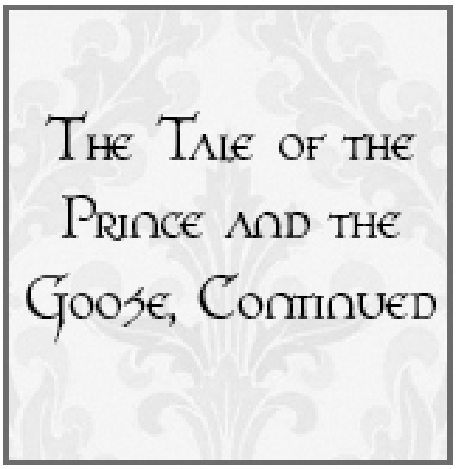
"Could you do it to another person?" I asked suddenly.

Grandmother's eyebrows knitted, as if she were trying to work out a strange set of hoofprints. "I don't know. I think I could, I… I suspect there's a way it could be done. But I wouldn't like to be the one to try it."

"Do it now, then!" I cried, grabbing at her skinny hands. "Turn into a mouse and crawl out through the lock, or a bird and fly out through the window

grate. Bring back a key and let me free, and we'll go into the steppe together, and eat deer, and never think about this place again."

"Poor little Knife, you can be dull and blunt as a rock, sometimes," she said kindly. "If I became a mouse, I would scurry out and think of nothing more pressing than getting cheese into my little gray belly. I would forget you, and we would never eat deer together again. Besides, I have a killing to do before I can think on mice or birds. And you have a birthing."



The Witch stopped speaking. Night streamed through the Witch's windows like bolts of silk. Thick and black, it coiled around them both. The Prince was uncomfortable and cold, his hands covered in bread flour, but he did not dare complain.

The Prince no longer heard her at all, and his hand had begun, again, to bleed. Blood trickled into the bread, but he did not see it. The crackling fire leapt like trout, scenting the hut with green branched sage and sweetgrass smoke. The Prince's eyes watered, though he did not know whether it was the stinging air that wrenched the tears from him or the buried memory pierced by her casual mention of his mother. The memory had paced back and forth in him for hours, a flash of yellow hair and a flutter of wings beating at the back of his brain.

And it all was becoming so strange and hard to follow, the path he had taken to this house through the forest, the braided words spilling like ink from this gnarled woman's mouth, the throbbing fear waiting in him, that at the end of all this storytelling, he would still have to suffer her punishment for his killing of the goose—and the memory, the memory, brushing his heart with its awful gray wings.

In truth, lost in her tale, he had nearly forgotten that there ever was such a pearl-feathered creature as that dead bird, that he had ever snapped its neck in the morning light. But he looked down at his flour-speckled hands, washed in the flicker of fire and shadow, and glimpsed drops of blacker blood among the

white dust and within his own wet wound, and remembered. It was only a moment ago, wasn't it, that he had left his father's Castle like a fugitive, determined never to return? And now he was a prisoner only a few miles beyond the borders of the kingdom, his adventure cut off before it had begun. He was lost as a trapped hare, lost in the mire of this hissing voice, of the hut shadows and the fire and the corpse of the goose-girl, crumpled against the wall, near the hearth to keep her flesh warm.

And now she had uttered his mother's name, and those old, forbidden syllables layered her tale, which had nothing at all to do with him, of course, but somehow his mother's memory was a rough lever, and with it the Witch slowly broke him open, inch by bone. He had hardly heard the last sliver of the long tale, so sunk in sorrow, its waters swirled around his chin.

The Witch cocked her head to one side, watching her guest with mild curiosity. Quietly, she took his hand in hers and pressed her palm against the bloodied fingers, stilling the blood. She rubbed some sweet-smelling root against the stubs of his fingers—it prickled cold against his raw flesh.

"Grass and leaves," she snorted. He tried a wan smile, but it refused to come. The Witch narrowed her feral eyes at him.

"What is it, boy? My servant, yet you cannot even listen to me for an evening? Instead you wrap yourself up in your own troubles like a bolt of wool, and moon after me to take them off your shoulders."

"My mother," the Prince mumbled, "you said you knew my mother."

"And you told me not to speak of her," she grunted. "Very well, then, shall we stop and listen to the murderer beat his breast and spit out his woe onto my floor? Your mother is dead and your father has all but erased her from the memory of the world. Is it necessary to know more than that of the poor woman?"

Her voice had cracked dangerously at the end, and the Prince started at it, marveled at the things which must have passed in the kingdom without his knowledge, to find exiled deep in the forest a woman who had known the dead Queen. Oh, the name of his mother was written neatly on the genealogical rolls and trilled in country songs which mostly praised her long and yellow hair—but that same name was forbidden within the rooms of government, and within any room his father might hazard to step. Yet the Witch knew her.

She rubbed her long bony fingers, a sound like branches rasping together in the wind, and grinned up at him again, under the gray and greasy curtain of her hair.

"You think I am so wicked, don't you? A monster. Unnatural. How cruel of me to keep you here and rattle on about my dead grandmother whom you care nothing about. To hold back the doom I keep in store for you and tease you about your mother. I am telling you all this for a reason, you curdle-brained child. Didn't you ever have a tutor? I am teaching dead, dull history—so that you will understand why your feet carried you *here* instead of towards some other broken old woman's hut, and what you ended when you snapped my daughter's neck. Don't keep looking at me with that same idiot stare. Listen, or you will comprehend nothing, not even your mother. Shall I just kill you now and have my revenge? It would certainly save breath, and at my age every breath is named and numbered. I entertain you at the expense of not a few figures in that scroll of sighs, boy; do not test me." She paused, grimacing as if she truly were tallying the accounts of her lungs. "And never assume that a woman is wicked simply because she is ugly and behaves unfavorably towards you. It is unbecoming behavior for a Prince."

She slurped her tea noisily. When she spoke again, her voice had softened from a dagger point to a smooth, hand-warmed pommel.

"But I can see that you are in pain, and that is the province of monsters. You drag your mother's corpse with you—it leaves a great furrow in the earth. If it is important enough to very rudely interrupt a woman who already owns two fingers she did not have this morning just to exhume those old bones, I will listen to you instead. It matters nothing to me. Believe me, it will not go easier for you if you come to feel warmly towards me because you have unburdened your soul. We have all the nights the world has ever made ahead of us. Speak of the dead in the dark, boy, and I will take her body from you, if you want to be rid of it."

The Prince looked up at her, hunched as though whipped, his ribs creaking within him, as though chipped by thousands of tiny blades. He could not breathe, his heart slammed against his chest, his throat flamed. He wanted to tell her what he knew, his soul scorched itself black in the effort, but he could not speak.

And the Witch was laughing at him.

But it was not a vicious laugh; rather, the old hag's chuckle had gone sad and soft and sorry.

She leaned in, her movement like a door closing. "You tell him her name. You tell him, when you see him again."

She placed her leathery hand on his forehead, and the other over his lips, cradling his head between her hands like a beloved doll. He wanted to loathe her touch, to spit at her, but as soon as her dry flesh touched his, peace flowed over him like a rippling river, his muscles unlocked and his breath returned. Her hands on him were like the paws of a bear on her cub, strong and cool. When she let him go, he was wide-eyed and straight-backed, his forehead cool.

"Grass and leaves?" he whispered.

"Quite so," said the Witch.

And with a smooth throat he let fall the words that had long since rusted in him:

"My father killed her." He shook his head. "It seems like an easy thing to admit, now, but no one speaks of it. No one. I was only a baby when she died, but my nurse told me the way of it, over and over like a lullaby. She was determined that I hold this thing inside me like a heart—something irremovable and constant. She would hold me to her, and whisper the same story, endlessly repeated. I remember her hair, like a forest of straight, white birches all around me, and her dark eyes above…"



YOUR MOTHER WAS MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN THE summer sun, little one. They'll tell you she weren't, that she were ugly as a frog's gullet, but it's a lie. Yaya tells the truth to her boys, always and always.

All of gold she was, her hair, her skin, even her eyes, like a lion's. She was called Helia, and that's as good a name as any I've heard.

Your father guarded her, jealous as a jackal, and kept her in a tower room. But her reputation as a beauty for the books filled the countryside. He weren't married to her too long before you were born—that's usually the way of it when the wife looks like a lion or a sun—and when you came out of her, easy as nothing, she loved you terribly. You were as dark as she was light, the tiny little moon to her sun. I was her maid then, and she was full of light. I tell you, darling-duck, it hurt to look at her sometimes, when she stood at her tower window with you at her breast, and her hair all filled up with fire. I used to wonder if she gave you milk, or if the sun just emptied into your mouth through her teat.

But one night she was not in her tower. You were almost a boy and the fat was still on your cheeks, then. You waddled about her empty room—your father didn't even give her a chair, I swear it. She stood all day, and lay on the stones to sleep, and I never heard the woman complain. And I can't say, since I'd have no way of knowing, what she did that strange night (the rich don't tell us but how they like their ribbons tied and their tea brewed, and Yaya doesn't

mind, it's their way), but in the yellow morning your father's anger clouded up heaven and shook the thatch from the ceiling.

He and his old fortune-teller blustered about the Castle, full of their own huffing wind, blaming me for letting her free, as though a Queen ought not to do as she pleases. He seized me by the arm hard as an iron cuff and we raced up the rickety staircase to the tower where your mother stood, as calm as can be, and you a-sleeping in her arms with not a care in your head. She looked at your father with the glance of a tiger with a full belly, her golden eyes all bright with hate and happiness.

I won't forget that look, not for all the apples I could eat. Helia hated the King, and that's the truth; you ask him when you're grown and see if he calls your old Yaya a liar. You woke up with a cry when your father ripped you from her and shoved you into my arms, just before he hit your mother so strong that she spat a tooth onto the floor—how do you like that? But she didn't hardly blink, and that awful look never left her eyes. He hissed at her, and it was a strange, black, dark thing he said:

"Woman, you will not make me a fool again. I should have cut your throat when I first saw you."

"Probably true," purred your mother. And then the King smiled, and I began to be afraid that there was something secret and rotten in my master—but I said nothing. A servant never says nothing unless she's asked, and who ever asked Yaya a thing but when the supper was coming?

"Do you remember?" he spat. "With your death I instruct your son."

She grinned horribly at his purple face and whispered just as sweet as cream, "And he will learn, oh husband mine. He will learn."

She died the next morning. I couldn't guess why or for what crime, but she was executed like a thief caught with a slab of butter. I was there, in the courtyard, and I held you close, and like a good nurse I turned your face away at the last moment.

It was before dawn, in the sleepy gray, and your father pulled poor Helia out of the Castle, in a plain white shift with her hair streaming like fire in the fog. The batty old conjurer was there, in his fine blue robes, but he never spoke a word—a servant never says nothing unless he's asked—just smiled softly all the while. The King tied your poor dam onto a pile of fresh-cut logs and tied her

to it with rough-hewn ropes. She didn't struggle, not even when the ropes were so tight her wrists bled. But when she saw you, well, no mother is so strong she doesn't care if her babe sees her burn. She wept, then, and screamed, trying to reach out to you, her little chick a-peeping away in the morning, though she never begged to live, no, not once.

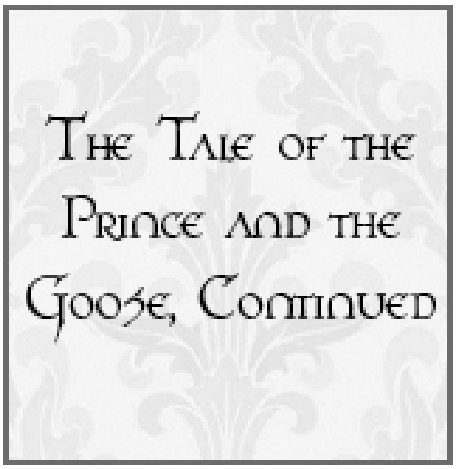
I wanted to help her, Yaya did, but I would have burned beside her, and you would be all alone with no one to love you and stand up between you and the rotten thing in your father.

The King drew a long knife and hacked off her magnificent hair, handing the length to his addle-brained Wizard. They stood over her for a moment, and your sire's face was dark as dirt. Then, he lit the branches of ash and oak with a great crackling torch, and she was still screaming, but it had a terrible, terrible keening sound, like a song, a frightful death-song that came out of her bones, and you cried even harder, so scared you were by that screeching, singing noise. The fire licked at her feet and caught her dress; it lit up her head like an angel's.

Now, your Yaya wouldn't lie, no matter what they tell you at dinner, so listen when I say what I saw. When the fire had wrapped her all up in red, through the wriggling flames I saw your mother *change*. Her hair went from gold to black and the shape of her body wobbled in the scald, looking now like the Helia I knew, and now like someone else, someone ugly and horrible and dark as anything.

They'll tell you Yaya is off her head and drinks too much bad red beer, but I think the Wizard saw it, too, and his eyes went angry. He rushed us all out of the cold, saying that someone would come clean up her bones, but that the baby shouldn't see—I told him right out if he didn't want you to see he ought not to have dragged you out of bed to watch, but he ignored me like that ragged old stork always does.

But, dear-as-dumplings, her crying followed me, clawing at my back, and behind the cries, behind them I could swear I heard rustling, and flapping, and fluttering, and it only got louder, louder and louder until I had to hold my hands over my ears as we ran from her, from your mother, burning like meat.



"Is that all?" the Witch asked, her tone bored.

The Prince nodded dumbly, though something small and calculating had entered his heart, as though he had caught the scent of a stag in the brush, a stag he was sure to catch, if he could creep silently enough. Knife arranged herself on her fur-covered stool and began again.



Time ran along like a leopard with eight legs in those cells—we could not see it, could not hear its passing, but it crept by on those spotted paws and ate us whole just the same. I grew round as a harvest moon, though my limbs were like birch twigs and my cheeks sunk in my face. Hunger and darkness watched over us like worried nurses.

And one night I lay down among the mildewed straw and the scurrying, squeaking rats to give birth to my child. My grandmother held me in a nest of her limbs, bracing me against the stone walls, her face pressed against mine, whispering while I whimpered and wiping away my dirt-blackened tears. She rubbed my swollen belly with her wrinkled brown hands in a swirling motion like the patterns of birds migrating.

The pain was its own world, its own landscape drawn in red and black and flashes of sobbing white. I screamed—but everyone screamed in the prisons. I cursed everything I could think of—but curses are common in jails as gangrene. My hair was matted to my skull with sweat and my bare feet slipped on the floor as I kicked and thrashed like a sick bullfrog. My body ate itself, tearing its own bones apart. I cried and cried. I clutched at Grandmother and she clutched at me, trying to calm me down, nuzzling me like a wolf cub in the snow.

I couldn't feel her, I could only feel myself coming apart.

But my daughter was born, perfect and whole, with a shock of black hair and calm black eyes. I held her in my arms, her wet, shaking little body, born in

the darkness far from our home. Smiling into her face I rocked back and forth, beyond words, beyond despair.

And then my grandmother's voice slid into me like a needle drawn through linen.

"But we cannot keep her, Knife, you must know we cannot keep her."

I shrank away and drew my daughter tightly to me. Grandmother hushed me and began to move her hands over me again, to make it better, as if I were a child with a stubbed toe.

"She would never survive. The King would have such a tiny thing killed, even if she did not starve to death in this place. She cannot stay with us. You know it, you just don't want to know it—no mother would."

I am so ashamed of my tears that night, hot and thick, dripping like candle wax from a thousand temples, but they would not stop.

"No, no, she's mine, I love her already. If you loved her, you wouldn't ask me to give her up. I won't give her up, I won't." I looked up helplessly. "She doesn't even have a name! How can I?"

Grandmother's eyes creased with pain, a book read too often, and by rough hands. She shrugged, knowing how stubborn I could be, and for the first time went away from me in the dark, and huddled in a far corner of the cell, hugging her knees to her chest on a pile of mold-greened bones. After a while, I heard her snoring.

After all her talk, the next weeks in Grandmother's silence were like being plunged into cold water without a chestful of air. She would not speak to me, and I was, for the first time, really and truly imprisoned. We squatted in our separate corners like prizefighters. I nursed my baby girl as best I knew how, her fierce little mouth tugging my breast, her fierce little cries tugging at my ears. She tired me, oh, how she tired me! I could only nap, like a sick cat, awake and asleep, awake and asleep—flagstones are no cradle, and they are no bed, and I had no horse milk to teach her the taste of them, and no steppe grass to teach her the feel of it. She would never know any of the things I knew.

And her black eyes were always open in the dark. Her skin was always pale and clammy, and she shivered so, she shivered so in the damp. She was thin and chilled, thin as a window, and I wept while she suckled, rocking back and

forth against the slimy wall. She never cried at all. She just watched me with those hollow black eyes.

"Aerie," I sniffled one night, into the shadows where Grandmother hunched. "I'm calling her Aerie."

"That's a hopeful name, for a girl who will probably never see daylight, let alone a high nest between snowy mountains."

I stroked her soft cheek, which had no color at all, just a shallow grayness beneath the skin. She turned her mouth to my finger, and for the thousandth time, I began to cry. I was so weary of crying, by then. My milk and my tears spilled out of me every day and I thought every day that I must have no wetness left in me to give, but every day I wept again, and nursed again.

"I can't, Grandmother, I can't. You want me to put her down like a horse with a shattered knee and I *can't*. Even if it would be better for her, I couldn't, I couldn't even keep myself from going to her the moment she cried—her cry is a hook and it catches me in the throat."

"Oh, little one, I would never ask you that. How could you think I would? Not for nothing have you heard me rattle on like a tortoise shell blown from stone to stone. What we can give her is better than that, and certainly better than what we will manage for ourselves. Knife, let me have her; trust that the tale I told was to a point. You want to call her Aerie? Well enough. We'll see what we can do about getting her one."

She had to pry Aerie from me like a jewel from its setting, and she smiled, sad and small, at her great-grandchild's slight weight in her arms, touching her for the first time since she took the child from my body. Grandmother laid the baby out on what rags we could gather, to protect her from the cold floor. Aerie began, then, finally, to cry, sucking great icy breaths and sobbing to the rafters.

The old woman began to prepare herself—for what I could not think—shutting her eyes like veiled doors, and instructed me to do the same.

I saw no point. All I had was the power to kill a few deer and ride a horse, bind up a rotted limb and set a bone. If we weren't going to kill my child, I had no help to offer. She told me what I am. Grass and leaves. My tiny girl continued to wail; it disturbed the worms and roaches and spiders that

crawled happily over our cell. I ached to reach for her, to wrap her again and hold her to my breast, no matter how dry and exhausted that breast might be.

Grandmother let her fingers fall over Aerie's solemn face. "I'm… I'm not sure this is going to work, you know." She cleared her throat. "I have never done it, and the Wolf never told me if it was allowed. A hole is nothing but space, but a filled hole is a Star. I am full, and she is empty. That should be enough."

I had never heard my grandmother doubt a single thing under the red sun. If she had said that one rabbit should be enough to feed the world, I would have nodded and set about stripping its fur.

Grandmother bent her head to the floor as if in prayer, and slowly thumped her skull against it, over and over, harder and harder. I tried to catch her and pull her up but she shoved me aside and kept at it, slamming her face into the stones. A dark, wet mark spread beneath her, and the sound of her bone hitting rock grew thick and ugly before, finally, she stopped and raised up her face again.

It was bloody, yes, but among the black streaks of blood were streaks of silver, streaks of light, like gray growing in a young woman's hair. It covered her cheeks and ran trickling over her eyes, dripping from her chin. She touched her finger to the soggy mess that had been her forehead, and seeing the light on her fingers, bent her brow to my daughter's mouth.

Aerie did not seem to understand at first, but the silver and the black dribbled into her mouth, and she had never needed much prodding to suckle. She fastened her mouth to Grandmother and patted her tiny hands against the old woman's hair with a hungry baby's glee. The light went into her, and the blood, all together, and in the dark, my daughter glowed.

Grandmother pulled away, and wiped Aerie's mouth like any other child's. She put her hands on her poor, pale body and clamped her eyes shut, breathing hard and harsh, grinding her fingers against my child's flesh as though she were shaping her like clay.

Slowly, Aerie changed. Her feet warped with moon-colored light and seemed to melt, her arms flattened like sheets of paper without ink. Feathers grew like silken hair on her body, first the curling down and then the strong gray feathers of flight, tipped black at the edges, the color of silver thread

spinning on a crystal wheel. Her mouth, silent, as if in wonder herself, bent into a graceful beak, which snapped in a kind of awe at the empty air.

Only her eyes were the same, the watchful gaze colored like stones at the bottom of a lake.

She hopped up, my girl, now a pretty gosling, and nuzzled my palm with her soft head. She was still so small. I bent and kissed her feathers, feeling my heart wither like a dead hawthorn within.

We carried Aerie to the barred window and, balancing on a pile of bones to reach it, squeezed her little body through the gaps.

"There are hundreds of flocks of geese in this country, Knife. One will care for her until she is grown. It is for the best. We will not manage nearly so well. Go, little bird."

Aerie looked at me for a long moment, her black eyes glittering in the frosted wind. Then she turned and hopped from the half-buried window into the deep grass. It was dark and the stars were burning their holes in the black. I watched her go, out of one darkness and into another.



Three days after we watched Aerie stumble away over the fields, the great iron doors which separated the damp dungeon from the court glistening in candlelight were flung open with such force that they cracked the stone foundations. Grandmother and I were seized by rough hands that bruised and tore at us as we were carried up and up the spiral staircases on which I had been borne downward into hell—so long ago it seemed another woman. Our eyes could not adjust, everything was washed in white and yellow.

And so, when we came before the King, we could not look directly at him at first, so bright was the sun glinting off his golden crown and jeweled jacket. This, of course, was what he wanted. Later I would learn that he rarely wore

the regalia for audiences. A tall man announced the King, a tall man whose hair was twisted, knotted, falling slate-gray to his hips. He wore a wide, bolted iron collar that brushed the fabric of his blue and brown robes.

"You have been brought for judgment before His Royal Highness, King of the Eight Kingdoms and Steward of the Eastlands, Autokrator of the Unified Tribes, Lord of the Thousand Caves, the Sacred Vessel who owns all above and below earth. This is your Arbiter."

By then I could see in the glare the coldness of the King's eyes, like ice beneath ice. The herald had a cruel mouth, and he turned it on me, pursing his thick lips as he surveyed my emaciated form. Grandmother was stiff as a bristling hound beside me; she recognized him as her would-be master—Omir, the court Wizard who stood ever at the King's ear. Before I ever came down the stone stair, he had tried, and failed, to bend her into the shape he wished, as though a woman were a stubborn plank of ash wood.

"You have"—and his voice, his voice was like oil sliding on silk, sinuous and sickening—"You have committed treason, my clever, clever girls. Not a minor feat when locked in a room underground, but you've managed it. You have engineered the loss of the King's rightful property. What's more, the property in question was not a prize won in war, but born right here within His Highness's borders—within his very walls!—and clearly his legal chattel."

The Wizard rubbed his long fingers as if they hid some secret ache. Grandmother looked at him levelly, her voice empty of fear as a hollow egg.

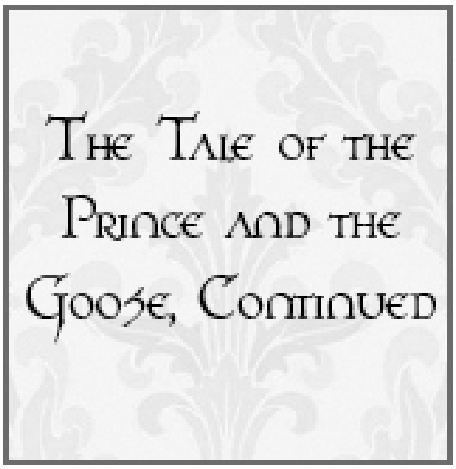
"Why do you not come near to me, Omir *Doulios,* and tell me how my great-granddaughter is the property of this wallowing pig?"

The Wizard seemed to flinch, but he quickly smoothed his face over. "How close, old woman? Close enough for you to slip a knife under my ribs? I think not. I need not even offer evidence—your admission of a great-granddaughter is enough." He looked at me with a hot stare that clung to my skin and held me limp in its grip. "The dam has foaled—where is the colt?" I tried to speak, to protest, but Grandmother silenced me with a squeeze of her hand on mine.

"You will not get what you desire this way, either. It is not for you," she hissed. And at this the Wizard did step closer.

"I will not get it, you dried up old soup-bone. I will take it."

But his one step had been enough. With a cry like a bear run through with a spear, Grandmother laughed at him, drawing a silver knife with a hilt of bone from her tattered dress. The knife cut true, and slid redly across the Wizard's neck.



The fire had guttered to nothing and the Prince sat in darkness, staring at palms he could not see. The Witch touched lightly the knotted scar on her fore head, the line that twisted and looped like a sea serpent. She smiled grimly, her mouth knotting upward in just the same line.

The accusation lay between them on the table, fat and hideous, black-spined and full of smoke. The Witch said nothing, and he tried not to look at the corpse which lay covered in soot and dew, leaning against the fireplace like new-cut wood.

"I didn't know," the Prince whispered. "I couldn't have known. How could I? She *was* just a bird. I didn't mean…" He had ruined the only thing his precious quest had touched.

The Witch covered his shaking hand with hers. Her voice was soft and kind, as soft and kind as a Witch can manage.

"If you had meant it, my beautiful boy, I would have eaten your liver and smiled through the meal."

Prince Leander looked up at Knife with a sudden passion. "But there has to be a way to bring her back! There has to. You are a Witch. I am a Prince. In all the books, where there is a Witch and a Prince there is a way." He seized the edges of the table and leaned close to the crone. "Tell me how to do it and I will save her. It is what a Prince *ought* to do, to save maidens. I beg you, send me to the farthest ice cap, or the widest swamp, but I will go if it means her life."

The Witch smiled, a real and tender smile, as from a grown wolf to a whelp.

“Maybe. As you say, it is the main thing Princes are good for.”

The Witch was silent. She collected the dough from the table, flour and blood and tears and all, and slid it into a hulking oven.

“How did you escape from the Castle?” the Prince asked suddenly, wary as a cat.

“I was banished,” she replied shortly, pushing the misshapen loaf farther onto its iron grille.

Leander could see the rest of the tale piling up like fat parchment scrolls behind Knife’s eyes. But just as plainly he saw that she had told him all she wished to tell.

“All you must know is the evil your family has done to mine. She was the last of us, the last child of that poor girl who crouched in her tent while men butchered stars. Now that she is dead there will never be any more of us. That is a truth you can hold like a sun-baked brick in your hand. It has weight, it has heft. To save my daughter you need no more.”

“So there is a way. What must I do?” The Prince fixed her with that sincere gaze which all Princes possess.

The Witch grunted, squinting at him through the low light. “She must be wrapped in the skin of the Leucrotta under the new moon. Then it is possible, though not likely, that she will be restored.” The Witch waited for a response, but none came. “Really, boy. Have you never seen the outside of the Castle walls? The Leucrotta is a terrible beast who lives in the Dismal Marshes. He is the color of clotted blood, part stag and part horse, of a size that dwarfs both, a mouth that stretches ear to ear, and instead of teeth it has twin rows of solid bone. It is very fearsome, I assure you.”

“I am not afraid!” cried the Prince, nearly tripping over himself to show his willingness to brave any challenge to rescue the beautiful bird-maiden and redeem his family name.

“Wait, boy. You do not understand. Let me tell you a tale of another Prince who went to face the Leucrotta…”



Once upon a time there was a handsome Prince who went to rescue his innocent sister from the fell beast.

The Leucrotta snapped his spine with one crack of its jaws, and wore his head and hands on its antlers for a fort night in celebration.

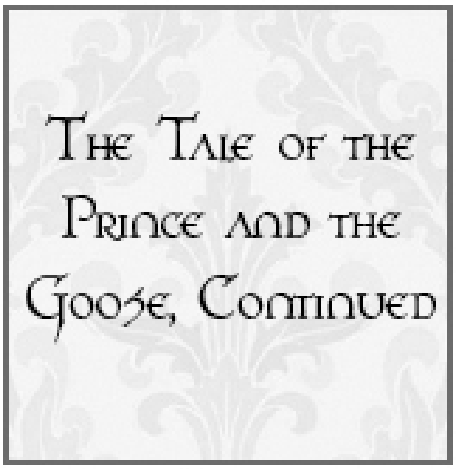
The Witch sat back with satisfaction.

In the Garden

The boy giggled. he sat primly across from the girl now, not nearly brave enough to attempt to touch her again. She laughed, too, a low, quiet sound in the dark. Her eyes drifted up through the cedar boughs, black hawks darting towards him and away again. They were nervous now, skittish and afraid of Dinarzad's thunderous steps which surely were not far off. There was no supper to distract them, only the two, eager to tell and eager to hear, awkward and unsure, terrified of discovery.

In the night, which cantered towards morning like an eager mare, he inched closer to her, and urged her not to stop.

The girl drew her breath inward and began again, with her voice of waving willows bordering a dark lake.



When Leander left the hut in the morning half-light, the Witch gave him a knowing grimace and kissed his cheek with her leathery lips. It was an awkward gesture, and he did not look her in the eye. But her hand fell to his, and unwrapped the leaves from his stumps. He was not very surprised to see that they had healed over entirely, new skin pink and warm, the fingers severed neatly at the knuckle, with no blood or scar to be seen.

"Grass and leaves," he said, smiling.

The Witch winked.

And so, the Prince left her, having found a Quest after all. He chased its tail into the high mountains tipped with snow like wise men's beards, and down to the sea, laid before him smooth as a dress. He did not mind the difficulty of the terrain, being, after all, a soldier, though it was more tedious than he had thought a Quest would be.

For instance, he had not guessed how much of the body of a Quest was simply *walking*. He walked until three pairs of shoes were ruined, cursing his lack of a horse. He stomped over every imaginable landscape from dank fen to pleasant farm to alpine ice. And yet, no one greeted him in the villages through which he passed. No one shouted with great joy that the Prince had blessed their village with his presence—what an honor to have you, Sire!—no one insisted he feast at their table—only the best of the harvest for you, Sire!—no one begged to be regaled with a song of his adventures—oh, do tell us of the terrible Witch, Sire!

In fact, no one took much notice of him at all—innkeepers were surly, tavern-women taciturn and rather getting on in years, milkmaids were unfriendly, wide-calved, and attached firmly to the flanks of their cows. After a time he looked not very different from the lowest peasants—covered in grime, face sour as a priest on Tuesday, and entirely without well-made shoes. All in all, it was nothing like what he had been led to expect.

One evening as the sun was counting up the day's gold in the west, Leander ducked into a seaside tavern in the north part of the country with a peculiar sign above the door—a great fist strangling a fish. He laid a few coins on the bar and rested his burning feet against the damp floor. He sucked down a bitter, watered-down ale that tasted of leather and warm bile. It was a filthy place, with dozens of dark, cowled faces peering out from what seemed like far more than four corners. At least in this, he had found, the tales were accurate: Disreputable strangers abounded, as numerous as whitecaps on the sea.

The bartender was a great hulk of a man who looked as though some giant had simply dropped an armful of limbs into a heap. He brandished a thick rag like a sword, and the rusted iron of his eyes dared anyone to order a drink. His hair was the color of sandy shoals that trapped the hulls of ships; his hands were the size of well-wrought drums. He smelt of lamp oil and brine.

He glanced at Leander under his heavy eyelids and said nothing as the young Prince grimaced at his mug. He didn't mean to turn up his nose at the house brew, but the stuff was so foul his face contorted without consulting him. The bartender scowled and spat. But Leander had gotten quite tired of his brusque reception in these wretched little towns. He glared at the barkeep.

"Do you know who I am?"

The slab of skin behind the counter studied the wood grain of his bar. "Yes," he grunted, "but you'll not get a better ale on account of it." The Prince rolled his eyes.

"That is not why I asked, good sir. It is," he struggled for the right word, "fine as the water of the wells at my own house. But all I have met have been rough with me since I set out for the Dismal Marshes, and I have very little time to find what I seek. If only the townsfolk would be *kind* to me, would smile and bow and point out the way like the markers on the dusty road. But they will

not. I guessed you knew me, yet you said nothing of it, nor offered yourself as helpmeet. Why?"

The man shrugged, and his body seemed to quake like the shifting of continents. "I know some things. Some things the common folk don't. They likely don't know you from the King's cows. And if they did—" The tavern-keeper's eyes glinted like the hull of a ship in morning light. "Your father is less than loved here. They'd like to take their taxes out of your hide, if they could manage it. They'd like to take back the babies that disappear into the tower of that sorcerer. Barring that, they'd like to kill you as payment for them. I'd not stop them, myself. Best if you don't make yourself known. You're *awfully* far from home. What does your name mean here besides a foreign tyrant? Not to mention, it isn't the habit of us *peasants* to be helping strange travelers. I'd rather have a dog with your pedigree, catch my meaning? And that's more words than I've said to a customer in a month, so take them well and get on your way."

The abashed Prince picked at his mug. He was becoming used to humility, to being shown that he was a fool. This alarmed him, of course, but this was hardly the place to show his courage and breeding.

"Will you tell me, at least, how to find the Dismal Marshes? I fear I have become quite lost. And," Leander gulped like a caught trout, "is it possible you know of a cobbler with a good pair of boots to sell?" The barman glanced over the ale-stained bar to peek at the princely toes poking out of the Prince's ruined shoes like worms out of a bait-sack. He grunted again.

"Once, when I was a young man, I went to the Marshes. I'll tell you the tale, if it'll clear you from my chairs."

The great-shouldered man straightened like a child reciting lessons, and when he spoke his tale, his voice became deep as the sounding of the sea on stone, and his words lost their slur. The Prince was transfixed, for by now he had become an excellent listener.

"My name is Eyvind. No reason for you to have heard it…"



In my younger days I was a bear. This is nothing to gawk at. Bears are quite common in my country, which lies as far to the North as the deserts lie to the South. All my land was covered in snow, and peopled with a proud tribe of pale-furred bears, who governed it well and wisely. When we moved over the ice we were like a wave that is gone before the foam touches the shore.

I was one of the white bears, and I was very happy. I loved a she-bear, and she was the finest of all our fishers. She could dip a silky paw into the rushing glacier melt and seize twenty salmon at once, holding them up like a bouquet of wildflowers. Her eyes were large and dark and they danced like the lights that often painted the night sky. She was a novice astrologer, but she could already read the Stars as easily as letters. When she stood on her haunches she was taller, even, than I.

In the Land Where the Snow Does Not Melt, the hours of our days were simply filled, with fishing and hunting, with the rearing of cubs, with watching the Stars. My people were always very great astrologers, though rarely consulted by you folk. Once in a very great while a *Versammlung* was held—a Congress of the Bears.

And so a Versammlung was called the day I and several other young bears were to announce our chosen mates. Such things are dependent on the Star-motion, and the Congress must be consulted. Seal fat was laid out like a glistening carpet with great slabs of salmon, pinker than a cub's paw in the first

hour of his life. Hundreds of white foxes had been killed in honor of the Star-gods, and I had made a cloak of their fur for the offering.



A Versammlung is something to see. The bears come across the glaciers like blocks of living ice, and their eyes flash brighter than a glimpse of seal flesh in the cold water. By the time they had all arrived, the Stars had already begun to shine in through the curtain of sky. I bowed before them. It always pays to be polite when one is asking for a favor. Besides, I was sure that they would approve my choice—she was after all the pride of the Land Where the Snow Does Not Melt.

"The Stars whisper on their sky-floe," one bear began.

"Bless them in their cloud-hunt," I answered. All these things are ritual—no one says a word that has not been spoken a thousand times before, a thousand thousand times, and even the first of those was a repetition of words that came before.

At this the rest settled in, ripping into the seal flesh with great relish.

After all had eaten and were rolling back on the snow, a great, woolly bear came forward. I knew him; he was called Gunde, quite the fiercest of us.

"The Stars whisper, brother. A great horror has occurred far away to the South. The red summer fire which is called the Harpoon-Star told me. One of his sisters—murdered. A Snake-Star, beautiful and green, and she is dead." The bears sent up a terrible howl of mourning, piercing as a bone-needle. I shivered.

"We weep for our sky-aunt; we mourn for the flesh that vanishes. It is a wicked omen. The shape of the Stars is confused—the signs of the Black Seal and the Caribou-Beset-by-Wolves are conjunct. The Great Paw is in retrograde. We have taken the augurs. You may not take a mate in this dark time, which must be a time of grief for all who still love the Stars. We are sorry, brothers."

I howled, long and low as a buried horn. How was it right that a death in the forest could deny me my heart on the ice? I dredged the frost with my claws.

"Perhaps in another year, when the Constellations have removed their veils of black and gray…" Gunde wanted only to comfort me, but I could hear the lie in his tender growls—the Stars never stop grieving. They had denied me my bride once and for all. Never would they be moved in their judgment. As we were taught long ago, the Stars cannot retrace their orbits.

"I care *nothing* for the death of the serpent-god." The Versammlung gasped at my blasphemy. No one but I in my rage would have dared to show a callused paw to their names. "If you will not grant me my mate, I will take her and we will travel to another sea, where the snakes and stars do not command."

A soft step sounded behind me, and I could smell her icy fur before I could see her, those clear black eyes looking down at me with pity.

"No," she whispered, and her voice was like the slide of a cub's belly on the ice. "Did you think I spent all my days looking down at the ice? I see the sky like any bear, and better than most. I saw that the sign of the Fox-That-Is-Hard-to-Catch dipped below the horizon out of season, and that the Moon darkened like whale's blood on the glacier. Then, when the Hunter's Knife rose in the South, I knew that the clouds were full of grief. It is not meant to be, Eyvind. And more—the Molted-Antler is in the Third House—you will have no mate, not now, and not ever. Not I nor any other. What is written you cannot un-write. Smile as best you can and hunt with me, fish with me, but do not ask me to your den. You can curse the Stars, but I will not."

"Beautiful beast, choice of my heart!" I wept openly in the sight of all my warriors, unable to believe that I would be denied something so obviously fated. "No," I suddenly cried, "I will not smile. I will travel to the forest of the South and avenge the death of the Star-sister, the serpent-god. I will right the wrong done to her sacred flesh and I will win the favor of the Harpoon-Star, He-Who-Pierces-the-Underfur-with-His-Light. He will give me my bride. I have fought a thousand battles against fierce tribes of wolves. So, too, will I win this battle and call her my victory."

My love just shook her great white head and padded heavily away across the snow.

I left the rest shuffling on the ice. I went immediately. I took nothing. I did not once look up at the Stars for guidance. I heard none of my brothers' protests, nor my bright-tailed bear's tears falling like first snow on the frozen earth. I thought then that I knew the right path, that it stretched out before me so sure, so sure and straight that I could not help but follow it. My paws would find it easily, since this must all have been written long before. Why else would the snake-god have died, except to be avenged by me?

As you can see, I was a very stupid bear.

I journeyed south from the glaciers no one of my kind had ever left. I ate salmon from the stream, I bandaged my paws when they bled from the incessant walking, I spoke to nothing, since there was nothing to speak to. In the deep nights I watched the Mother's-Milk glow white against the sky, winding through the Stars like an unspooled thread.

The world is wider than any one bear can fathom. It gobbles distance like a hungry cub. I could not, after a full cycle of the moon, understand why the land had not yet become the burning jungles of the Southern Kingdoms, why the sun did not glower red, why the Stars had not shifted into Constellations of which I had only heard legends: the Scorpion, the Lion, the Serpent. I still moved through a landscape of cold wind and mountains like broken teeth. At this rate my love would be a grandmother, gray in fur and tooth, before I could have her.

When the moon had become full for the third time since I set out, and rode the sky like a great whale, full-finned and gleaming, the earth did, abruptly, change. It became wet and full of green things; water ran freely here, in sluggish streams there, grass-colored and strung through with amber. I did not match the world anymore. My white fur stood out like a tear in the green hills. Tall reeds sprang up everywhere, thin and golden, and eels snapped their long bodies in the water. I could see great copses of tamarind trees with their red roots gnarling, cypresses bruising the sky with their branches, briars and brambles like a human woman's long hair. Waterbirds dipped their beaks into the glistening creeks, their feathers shining like untrammeled snow.

All I had known was the pure and unbroken white of my home, the pale horizon going on and on forever. The Dismal Marshes were beyond my heart's experience. I could smell the thickness of the air, the dank smell of growing things twisting in the earth, the softness of rain and fruit on the trees. My fur rippled, both afraid and awakened.

As I stood with my paws gathering mud, one of the massive waterbirds broke off from the flock and leapt towards me, half walking on his thready legs, half flying. He was bright green, the color of the grasses around him; some of his feathers were such a rich shade of it they were nearly black. His eyes were flashes of sudden rainstorms. His beak curved earthward like a scimitar, and quite as sharp. He was so bright I had to squint, my eyes already weary of so much color. He was clothed in the colors of the sky after the Sun has fled, rimmed in light.

The bird stopped up short very near to me, flaring his great wings and stamping his feet. I could smell his flesh, like salt fish and rich soils.

"Well, I say," he began in a svelte voice, "this *is* an oddity. I shall have to call upon Beast at once! One does not keep such a thing to oneself; it is *quite* rude. Come then, don't stand there gawking like a hatchling! You may come to luncheon and discuss what, exactly, we are going to do with you."

Spluttering, I moved to catch up with him, splashing in silt and green water up to my knees, as he was already sprinting far ahead in his peculiar half-flight across the marshes.

"Wait!" I called, and my voice boomed out over the swamp, scattering cicadas and kingfishers in its wake.

"Waiting, waiting, lady-in, gentlemen-out, wait for water and meet the drought!" the great heron sang out over his emerald shoulder, and ran even faster. He was a blur of green and blue, and I could not keep up.

But as I stopped, panting, fur soaked in sweat, I saw a massive, gnarled hall of tamarinds which arched up to make a thatched roof of leaves, and the bird leaning against the doorpost.

"How *do* you hunt even the smallest mouse, Eyvind? Really!" And he ducked inside, leaving me to be stunned at the sound of my own name from this bizarre creature's mouth.

A little lunch service carved from cattails and willow roots sat on a small table in a room any gentleman would be proud to call his. The tamarinds had coiled around each other to make three chairs and an array of cabinets, tables, and twisting staircases that vanished into a filmy mist, which hung over the room like a well-apportioned ceiling. I could not believe that I would fit in the little hall, but it seemed to suit me exactly, and as I watched, the red-tinged branches shifted and sighed to make a long ridge on which I could rest.

"They are so considerate, my tammies," the Heron said fondly, as he dipped his beak into a small cup and slurped with relish. I sank onto the fragrant bed with a heavy sigh, my muscles burning like lamp oil. Only then did I notice that we were not alone.

A huge creature the color of dried blood stood calmly in a corner, drinking from a large bowl of oak leaves. The rear of the hall had swelled tall and wide to accommodate him. His red antlers tangled rather horribly around themselves, and as he slurped at his tea, I could see that his teeth were not teeth at all, but a bright ridge of solid bone.

"Beast! This is the one of whom our Brother spoke! Is it not thrilling that he has come *directly* to my Marsh?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," the scarlet beast replied in a musical voice. His eyes twinkled with laughter like the fall of leaves on the water. "We do so rarely get such… *august* guests."

"Majesty?" I asked, unsure of what impossible kingdom the Heron could rule.

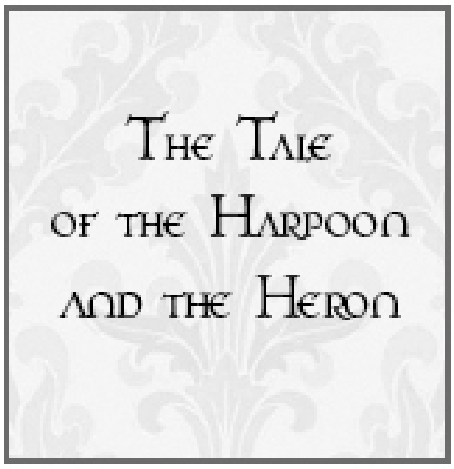
"Of course. I am the Marsh King. This is Beast, who is a kind of courtier of mine, you might say. It is a sad state for a King to have but one courtier, but he is quite a good one."

"How kind of you, Eminence," the beast intoned, with the slightest flavor of gentle mockery in his voice.

"Think nothing of it, my good friend! Now, we must to business, for there is not much time."

I was so bewildered at this point I could say nothing at all. But I forced my tongue to work in the dry cavern of my mouth. "How can you know my name? Who is this Brother of which you speak? I do not understand you."

“Oh, no one expects you to, dear chap!” the Marsh King assured me in a tenderly condescending voice. Beast winked at me with one crimson eye. The Heron continued, “You keep your counsel and the gods keep theirs. My Brother is the Harpoon-Star, who came to visit us some months ago and announced your coming. Sit still and I shall tell you of his audience.”



Laakea the Harpoon-Star burned black the marsh grass as he came. The smell of it, scorched bread and copper filings, heralded him long before his light appeared over one of the hills. In great circles it scalded, crisped, sizzled. Each step sent up hisses of steam as he walked through the Great Marsh, frogs and eels yelping in wordless terror as the fire of his heels lapped at their oily bodies. I felt the song of the grass steaming before I could see him—it had been many years since my brother had left his hermitage where he hunted moons like quick pale stags.

You'll forgive the flowery talk, won't you? Our family does so love to be told they are beautiful. Vanity is an old and venerable habit.

He was white, of course; his sort of Stars—the small and hot-burning ones—are always white. His hair fell like a newly washed sheet, long and flat to his waist, and his skin faded into the pale horizon, the shade of paper turned to ash. A great spear was slung over his shoulder by a strap of white serpent-hide; golden eyes panted beneath colorless lashes. He was barefoot; in fact, he wore no clothing but a bleached cloth over his angular hips, and his thighs were covered in arcane tattoos, the symbols of the Star-tongue. Yet even the ink of these markings was a strange silver that showed only when touched by the trailing marsh mist.

I embraced my brother awkwardly as he entered my hall, sending twigs into tiny conflagrations. I did not, of course, wish to burn my tammies, but the

proper affection must always be shown to visiting family. I tried to make the usual pleasantries and invitations to drink, but he would not have it.

"I have news. It cannot wait. Will you for once allow me to speak my piece without interruption?"

I blushed with great dignity and abashed grace. Settling myself to listen, I gratefully mused that Beast was out engaging one of the Princes that come into our realm occasionally, and so there would be nothing to disturb Laakea in his tale. He was not overfond of Beast—Stars care only for their kin. At any rate, they are dreadfully formal creatures, and Beast would be bored.

Removing his spear from his shoulders he sighed heavily, and his voice echoed through the trees like clouds across the face of the moon. "A terrible thing has occurred—a man has killed our sister, the Snake-Star of the South." He waited for my reaction, but the black Ibis-Emir had already winged north to tell me of her death, to weep his great sapphire tears into my hands. Seeing that I was not surprised, Laakea pressed on.

"I did not realize she had tarried so long in that damned kingdom, that blighted land of festering winds and towers that bruise the sky with iron fingertips…"



I CONFESS THAT I WAS MUCH CONSUMED WITH MY hunt, for I pursued a great rarity—a Firebird, as a wed ding present for my poor, wretched sister—and I tracked him over many a hill and river-carved valley. You know how we can be about things which sparkle and shine. We imagine they will put back something of what has been lost.

Firebirds are overfond of red fruits, and I had hoped to lure him with crimson seeds gathered from the Ixora, the Torch-Trees of the desert—very difficult to harvest, but the Firebird's favorite delicacy, bright and soft as a cherry, with a pit cased in flint and iron, to light the new tree aflame. Some Firebirds, it is said, even nest among the trees, and return there to lay their eggs in the ash like salmon swimming upriver.

I waited in the salt flats that border the Tinderbox Desert, and the Ixora that fire the night to keep the sky warm for the sun when it has gone below the earth. In the twilight I could see their orange branches flickering, snapping, sparking up like the camp of a thousand soldiers. I saw no Firebirds, but I was not concerned. They are secretive, and the forest of Torch-Trees is wide. I spent weeks searching out the guttering, dying ones, and collecting the juice-filled rubies as they dropped. I combed the ash of those already dead, but found no flaming eggs.

Finally, I had strewn the salt with cherry seeds—they were bright as drops of blood; surely the Firebird would swoop down to snatch them up in his bronze beak.

I waited for three nights, and the Firebird did not come. But on the third night I forgot him entirely. An appalling phantasm caught me on the flats and all thought of my quarry vanished.

Three of our sister's handmaidens—you know them, of course; sweet little serpent-girls they are, their hair all flowered with jade grass-snakes and emerald vipers—stumbled through the sand, clutching each other for the strength to stand. Their holy vestments were torn as if by a great claw, hanging from their thin bodies like curls of new paper. I turned my head aside to give them modesty, for they were as near to naked as makes no difference, and their pale leaf-light skin was desert-scalded to scarlet. They moaned and screamed in such pitiful tones—a choir of anguish echoing in the desert canyons. I took this at first for simple cries of pain, but it was a lament, a lament and a requiem. They clutched me by my face and turned me towards them, forced me to witness their shame.

Brother, they were so horrible to see I can hardly tell you of their faces—their wounds were a tapestry of broken flesh. And yet even this had not sated the men who dared lay hands on their sacred bodies, but their tongues had been cut out by rough knives, and only ragged stumps remained to form words. One took a strange object from her sister and pressed it miserably into her parched mouth.

"Sssspear-brother," she hissed, "our mistresssss is ssslain, dead, dead and gone. Thisss is what the men who took her did to ussss. They were pig-demonsss, they mauled our bodiesss with cloven hoovesss. We have walked all this way from her grave to find some part of her family. Pray put usss to death so we may not sssuffer longer than it was necessssary to deliver our messssage."

I looked on, nauseated, as the second of our sister's maidens took the object from her sister's mouth and pushed it into her own. "We have traveled far to find one of our kin to take the burden of knowledge from usss. We are not sssuicidesss; you have to help ussss. But in return we will help you. We are sssseerss, we know what isss to come, we sssee the flux of time like water poured from one cup to another. You mussst go now, to the North, and prevent vengeance from falling into the handsss of one who would pervert what our missstresss has already done in her own name, one who would erase

her holy work only to ssscribble over it with his own. Ssshe has died; ssshe has risssen—in his bumbling he will rob her of those things, all a ssshade can own." She took the lump of pink flesh from her mouth and gave it to the last of the sisters.

"Holy seers, what is this misshapen thing you pass from mouth to mouth?" I asked with trepidation—such terrible magic was at work here I hardly dared speak. The Stars leave divination to those tied to the earth; we do not dabble in the future. Why would my sister have broken with tradition so?

"We ssstole it from the Basssilissk," whispered the third oracle pitifully, "it isss a tongue, ssso that we may ssspeak to grant you thisss warning. Were we to hunt down *three* monsssssterss? We are sssiblingss; we ssshare among usss."

The third sister was clearly the eldest, and the bearer of the clearest vision. She closed the one eye that remained to her and spoke without inflection the prophecy they had journeyed so far to disclose.

"You must sssee the Marsssh King. A creature of sssnow and claw will come to him, begging to avenge our missstress in order to incur your favor. He mussst not be allowed to pursssue thisss. Sssnakes sssee to their own; ssshe doesss not require thisss *animal*'sss assssistance. If he should stand in her place, her death will be wasssted—his path musst divert from herss in our sssight. He will only cause her death to be wasssted. Her coilsss are still in motion, and the Quessst of the creature will bring ruin on her plansss. Do you underssstand, Sssspear-Brother?"

I nodded my assent in the traditional manner, pressing my forehead to hers and accepting their burden. With this, the three of them in one movement collapsed onto the soundless sand, their fall as silent as snake-skin on the dunes. They were quite faint, hunger and sun and burning forests having leached all but the last of their light from them. The Basilisk's tongue rolled out of the third sister's mouth and onto the hot gold of the earth. Their eyes rolled up in their heads, and their mouths formed pleas I could not hear, but understood well enough.

But I could not do what they asked—even a bird must know that. Death is the wall we dare not look behind, and no Star has ever killed another. I would not be the first murderer of my kind.

Instead, I gathered up the blood-drop cherries from the sand. What good could they be now? My sister could not marvel at the color and the light of the Firebird. One by one, I carried woman and fruit into the Tinderbox true, and laid them out beneath the Torch-Trees. In their blazing light, the maidens seemed to glow as they must have when my sister took them in.

I cut deep into the Torch-Trees' ashen trunks with my harpoon. The bark is quite black and hard, calcified into iron by the constant fire. But within, within there is nothing but ash and a thin vein of boiling sap, as the trees consume themselves from the inside out. Only when they have burnt themselves to nothing will they drop a seed, the precious seed, and the clever gardener will catch it as it falls, while the tree crumbles into white ash and nothing more, so that the seed will not burst and flare the moment it cracks on the hard desert stones.

Of course, I had a sack bulging with the volatile little things, and no need of waiting till the Ixora died. Carefully, I peeled them and conserved the wet, sweet fruit, piling the flint-pits carefully as an apology to the tall tree, so that when it died for true a veritable jungle would grow in its place. With equal care I broke the sap-vein deep in the ash and dribbled the waxy, scalding stuff onto the mashed red cherry-flesh.

All this I smeared into the mouths of the three oracles, and then—forgive my arrogance, Brother Heron!—I cut into my own arm and let the pale light of my body flow into the searing medicine, into their mouths. We know of no greater sacrament, and I knew of no other thing I could do for them.

It was hours before they could sit up, and I was well healed by then. They did not thank me, still black in their misery, but the snakes of their hair hissed sweet and comforting in my direction. Wading in their sorrow like drunkards, they moved off into the desert, past the trees, swaying from side to side, clutching each other.

As they passed my cairn of seeds, the youngest of them kicked it over, and they vanished in the flash of spark and thick smoke.



He had finished his tale.

"Oh!" I interrupted, "the poor Basilisk! Has he no tongue at all now? What a wretched fate! He sang so beautifully last Equinox when I visited his caves!" Laakea glared sternly at me, making it quite clear that the hap penstance of my friend the Basilisk was of no concern to him.

"So you understand, Bird-Brother. When the creature comes, you must stop him."

"How to stop a creature on a Quest? What do you expect me to do? Spoil the hospitality of my hall?"

Laakea snorted. "I do not care. Kill him. Lock him away in a tree trunk. I trust in your wisdom. But I must bid you farewell. Much have I neglected in my journey to your marsh—I must attend to the funeral rites of our sister."

"It is not the place of any of us to interfere in the Quests of men. They insist on them—they are as fond of Quests as of their own hearts."

"Who is to say it will be a man?" Laakea answered, bored as a babe.

With this the white-clad Star left my hall, scorching the grass once more as he walked southward, sending up veils of mist that dissipated like a memory when he had gone and not even his footfalls could be heard.



"So you see, my dear lad, the dilemma." The Marsh King crossed his reedlike legs in a curiously fey gesture. "In no way can I allow you to do what you intend. It is not *personal,* of course. It is best in the end to let women see to their own vengeance. Those who meddle are seldom thanked—take my dear Harpoon's story as exemplum! Now. I don't suppose I can convince you to scurry on home and be a good bear from now on?"

I shifted on my paws and murdered my tears where they stood. "I cannot simply give up! I will go on, whether or not you tell me the truth. If she can contrive her own revenge from the grave, perhaps she can grant me the small thing I ask. Why would the gods conspire to rob me of a mate? Is it such a terrible thing to mate?"

"It is, in fact, quite insignificant," the Marsh King said gently. "The gods, if you insist on calling them such, do not conspire, but events themselves order the world like a pack of cards, and there is little you or I can do to change the cut of the deck. We must learn to accept personal loss gracefully. Duty is a *noble* word, after all."

I stamped in frustration and the branches of the hall shook wildly. "There must be a way! I have begun a Quest! Quests do not simply *end.* You win or you lose; it is not just suddenly *over*."

"I believe that you have, so to speak, put your finger on it. I see that it is not possible for you to accept that, this time, you simply lose. It is because a Quest is not a natural thing for your kind—nor mine, for that matter. A Quest is a

thing for men. It is their invention, their monstrous pet, their addiction. They own all the rights in perpetuity. Every step you take, my dear Eyvind, you are robbing men of their most dearly bought treasure. It is sad for them, that they have only the machinery of Questing to sustain them. But they are a sad race. We must weep for them, but not too much. And we certainly must not take on their ridiculous penchant for self-destructive behavior. Therefore, I have devised a way to prevent you from reaching the land of my late sister and yet preserve a small chance for you to achieve the end you desire. I shall make you into the very model of a Quest—I shall make you a man."

My mouth gaped. Horror shuddered through my fur and sweat dampened my great white jowls. "A man? Why must you punish me so?"

"It is not a punishment, you sorry beast," the Marsh King scoffed. "You took on a Quest, which is a thing only men—and exceedingly stupid men, usually—do. So you must become a man if you wish to continue on that doomed path. It is all really very simple and nicely symmetrical, if you think about it. And a man is not *such* a hideous shape to find oneself in."

"But if I am a man, the Snake-Star will not listen to me; Stars run from men, they hide away from their sweat and their stink. I can never see my beloved again! She would run from me herself, she would think me a hunter. I could not bear to see her run from me, and—"

"Oh, calm yourself. I did not say it would be permanent. You know, you might consider that a mate is not *strictly* necessary to survival. Look at Beast and me! We live together quite happily in blissful bachelorhood and we are not at all bothered by the lack of great, galumphing girl-bears about the house."

At this, Beast looked up from quietly playing a game of bark-piece backgammon against himself. "Mmm? Oh, yes, quite happily. Except for the flies, you know. His Majesty does tend to diet on a rather eclectic selection—quite nauseating to watch." He settled back into the game, which he was earnestly but decidedly losing.

"Well," the Marsh King pursed his beak politely, "at any rate, your manliness need only last for a relatively brief period. I have already discussed this in detail with some of the lower Stars—white dwarfs and the like. I shall bundle you up tight as a mitten in a human skin until," and here he cleared his long

blue throat dramatically, "the Virgin is devoured, the sea turns to gold, and the saints migrate west on the wings of henless eggs."

"In the Stars' name, what does *that* mean?" I gasped.

"I haven't the faintest idea! Isn't it marvelous? Oracles always have the best poetry! I only repeated what I was told—it is rather rude of you to expect magic, prophecy, *and* interpretation. That's asking quite a lot, even from a King." He appeared quite flustered, feathers blushing up into an indignant violet. "Just, well, keep a lookout for that sort of thing, don't you know. Sea turning to gold. Hard to miss, I'd say. Rather. Lucky to have such obvious signs. I should think you would be grateful. Now hold still, and let us get on with our business."

"Wait! I haven't agreed to anyth—" I meant to protest further, but I found my tongue no longer worked entirely well; it was short and stumpy and stuck to the roof of my mouth. Horrified, I glanced down at my mighty and beautiful paws only to find wretched, pasty feet covered with a scraggly down, stuck ridiculously at the bottom of skinny legs. With one touch of his wing, the Marsh King had made me hideously, but certainly, a man.



Yet the sovereign had changed as well. He was no longer a tall and regal bird with a respectably threatening wingspan, but a bent old man with a long beard that flashed all the colors of the swamp—green and brown and a brackish gray. He appeared somewhat fishlike, with sallow, damp skin and a wide, pale mouth.

"What is this?" I mumbled as best I could with my worthless tongue.

"Eh? What? Of course, I *am* sorry, I should have explained. When you were an animal, I appeared as a suitably noble animal. As you are now a man, I

appear to you as a grandfatherly old type meant to inspire the proper respect from your new breed of creature. It is a courtesy I extend. Think nothing of it."

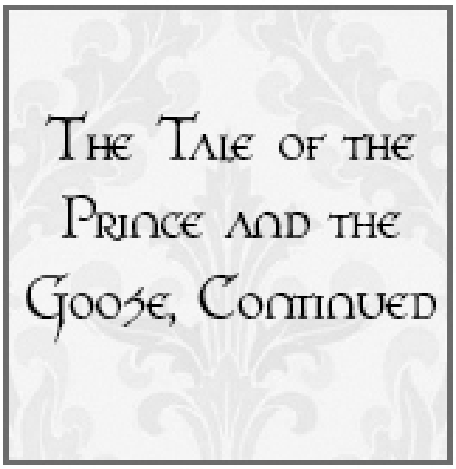
"But Beast?" I inquired helplessly, for the scarlet-hoofed creature was quite the same as before.

"Beast is just Beast. He is always Beast," came the monarch's bored but affectionate reply.

Hearing his name, the courtier's crimson head bobbed pertly. "Just Beast," he assured me.

The Marsh King raised himself up and ushered me out the door with the air of a host who has just realized he is one guest away from a comfortable nap.

"Off you go then, Eyvind, my boy—and ho! now you really *are* a boy! Splendid. We shall see you again, I have no doubt. Run along! Fare thee well and all that rot!"



EYVIND'S BODY RELAXED. HE HEAVED HIS GREAT mass onto a stool and sighed. "And I've been a man ever since. I got old and got fat until I looked something like a bear again, what with the gut and the hair. It doesn't do any good. I'm not a bear. I try, but I'm not. I'm still waiting for the sea to turn. It never does. I stay close to the Marshes, hoping that it's true that Kings don't lie. I don't have much hope; after all, your father is a King. The Marshes aren't more than a week's journey north of here. The days, they have their way with me now. Maybe I'll just die serving beer to brats in this filthy tavern."

The Prince stared at the surface of the bar, the loops and whorls of the wood like a fingerprint. "I am sorry for you," he mumbled.

Eyvind's face purpled. "I don't need your pity, boy. That's a useless load. I'll give you a pair of walking boots with no promise they'll fit if you carry a message—you ask that no-good bird when I'll be getting my own back. I'm sick of waiting."

"The… the Marsh King, you mean?"

"Stars, boy, you're thick as a cub still sucking at its dam. Yes, the Marsh King. A week's walk north and you'll be knee-deep in mud and eels. Now take these and be off before I charge you rent for that stool you're ruining." He tossed a muddied pair of greasy black boots several sizes too big for the young Prince onto the bar and disappeared with a final grunt into the back room.

Leander took the boots gingerly and slipped out of the tavern, his face burning under the stare of the bedraggled patrons.

He set out north as Eyvind had said, and indeed, at length he came to the Dismal Marshes, their borders a clear and sodden green, full of the stink of rotting grass and bone. He easily picked up the scent of the Leucrotta itself, which was indeed very like blood, coppery and sharp. The Marshes were wide and smoke-colored, jade over polished wood, the sluicing paths of swamplands with their rattling cattails and poised egrets. The water shimmered like necklaces laid over one another, and beneath the water he could see fat eels and the flash of fish.

In fact, the Prince found the Marshes very beautiful, but every step sucked at his oversized shoes until the going was so slow that he thought he might very well be stuck there, save that he knew he must return to the Witch by the new moon in order to fulfill his promise. And so he dragged himself through the swamps, mud sloshing around his boots and catching the sheath of his sword in its wet pockets. At each up-step the mammoth boots threatened to catch, but slapped up against his heels at the last second.

In the center of the Marsh there was a copse of tamarind trees, their reddish bark glinting as though embers burned within. He wondered at it for a moment, drawn to their color. But Leander had had enough of magic, and he quite feared to be further delayed by whatever terror dwelt inside. He gave it a wide berth, though it meant wetting his breeches to the waist.

Just as he passed the copse, a shape composed itself seemingly out of the water and grasses, blocking his way.

"Do you insult me by passing through my land without paying me a visit?"

The shape coalesced into an old man whose beard drooped like the whiskers of catfish and whose hair was a great mass of tumbling moss. His eyes were precisely the shade of marsh water, sparkling green and brown in turns. His hands were wrapped in river reeds and his cloak was sewn together from fallen leaves and acorn mash.

He stood calmly, three feet over the nearest cluster of grasses, fine webbed feet resting on air, bemusedly smoking a pipe fashioned from willow whips.

"Well?" he demanded.

The Prince did not splutter, nor grasp for words like a dying trout gulping for water that will not come. He blinked slowly, once, twice, and sat down heavily on a moss-covered boulder.

The specter laughed heartily. “Poor little hatchling. It all gets to be a little bewildering after a while, I’ll admit. I am the Marsh King,” he gave a courtly little bow, “and you will have come from the Witch of the Glen to kill my friend Beast. Now, of course, I can’t let you do that, but I am happy to pass the time discussing it with you, if you would like to have a Discourse on the subject.”

“A Discourse? On whether or not I am going to kill the Leucrotta?” Leander replied, nonplussed. The Marsh King’s shaggy head bobbed merrily.

“Oh, he doesn’t stand on formalities—prefers ?Beast.’”

“Whether or not I am going to kill the Beast, then?”

“Oh, I’m afraid you still haven’t got it, my lad. Just ?Beast.’ He thinks the ?the’ makes it seem as though he puts on airs. Fine chap, Beast is.”

“Beast, then.”

“Beast.”

“And whether I ought to kill him.”

“A Discourse is such a fine thing.” The Marsh King sighed dreamily. “I recall I had a fine one once, oh, fifty years or so ago. Some other upstanding, earnest hatchling harassing Beast… they do come along at a clip these days. Let’s have one, shall we?”

The Marsh King’s eyes flashed like a glimpse of eel flesh in the shallow water, gleeful and fey.



When the last young man came round, he was very rude about it, all manner of officious in his gold tassels and scarlet cape. He didn't visit me either, but when I appeared, he was amiable enough. Set his cape down on that rock and crossed his legs, as ready to Discourse with me as to lop off poor Beast's head.

"Now"—I began at the simplest point, as you'll see—"why do you want to kill Beast? He's not borrowed your sword and forgotten to return it, he's not spoiled your favorite sedan chair, he's not bothered you at all!"

"I am a Prince," he replied, being rather dense. "It is the function of a Prince—value A—to kill monsters—value B—for the purpose of establishing order—value C—and maintaining a steady supply of maidens—value D. If one inserts the derivative of value A (Prince) into the equation y equals BC plus CD squared, and sets it equal to zero, giving the apex of the parabola, namely, the point of intersection between A (Prince) and B (Monster), one determines value E—a stable kingdom. It is all very complicated, and if you have a chart handy I can graph it for you."

"Ah, my lad," I said, after he had quite spoiled one of my topographical charts with scribbling equations, "but Beast is not a monster. He does not gobble up maidens like cucumber sandwiches. He keeps to himself like any civilized Beast."

"But he is quite ugly?" the Prince insisted.

"I think he is a fine fellow, but some might consider him homely, yes."

"And he smells foul?"

"Well, I cannot argue with you there—one ought not to stand down-wind!"

"And he does have a terrible jaw of bone, and great tall horns?"

"Yes, yes, you've got Beast, all right!"

"Then he is a monster!" the Prince crowed, "and I must slay him at once. The Formula works!"

"Your Formula must result in a great deal of fighting," I mused.

"Oh, yes, when applied correctly mighty and noble battles result! Of course I always win—the value of Prince X is a constant. It cannot be lesser than that of Monster Y—this is the Moral Superiority Hypothesis made famous five hundred years ago by my ancestor Ethelred, the Mathematician-King. We have never seen his equal, in all these centuries."

"Of that I have *no* doubt."

"If that is all, I believe I must be about my Proof," said the Prince, brandishing his sword experimentally. "That is what we call a slaying," he explained, giving the blade a great swing over his head. "For each time a monster is killed, the Hypothesis is Proven."

"How jolly of you to give it such a… *civilized* name. But I cannot allow it."

"But… but…" he spluttered, indignant, "the Formula!"

"Nevertheless. This is my kingdom and no violence may come to anyone within my borders so long as I can help it. That, at least, you should understand. Here, my word is law."

"Oh, yes." He nodded. "The Universal Monarchic Algorithm is most central to the Theorem."

"Theorem?"

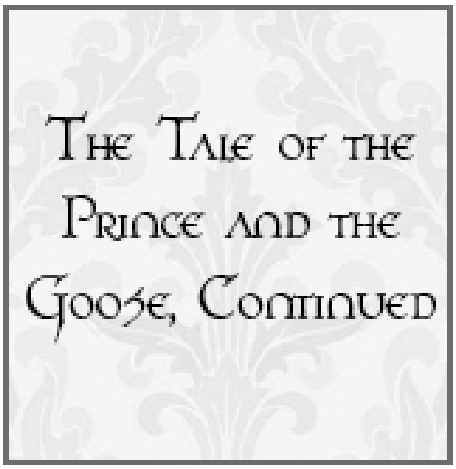
"Of Proper Conduct."

"Ah."

"I did my thesis on the Monarchic Algorithm," the young man huffed defensively. "If you will not allow violence within your borders—a moment, while I make some calculations"—he scribbled on my beautiful charts again—"I shall call him out—if he is a proper monster he will not refuse a challenge from a nobleman."

I sighed, giving in to the inevitable. "No, that he will not."

"Very well, then!" The Prince marched off humming a mnemonic tune as he went.



"Well, my fine boy, let me tell you! That boy tried to drop down from the crags onto Beast at the dueling ground—most unsporting—and got his limbs all tangled in poor Beast's antlers. It took us weeks to remove them—and such unsavory work it was. Perhaps you will show more sense. Now then," the Marsh King said, peering at him over abalone spectacles, "do you know any Formulae or Theorems?"

The Prince shook his head.

"Thank the wide-brimmed hat of heaven for *that*. Perhaps that style of government has gone out of fashion. Yet I fear you will still insist on disturbing Beast at this uncivilized hour."

"I must."

"And why? We have already established through the recitation of a *most* agreeable secondary Discourse that Beast is not a monster." The Marsh King wrinkled his greenish nose in a puzzled way.

"I know." Leander sighed. "But it cannot be avoided. And I have a question to ask of you before I reveal my purpose."

"For *me*?" The Marsh King brightened considerably, his whiskers rising with pleasure. "Almost all the young men come for Beast! I have not had a visitor in ever so long. What is it, my fine, attractive, *excellent* young man?"

"Eyvind wants to know how much longer he must wait for the sea to turn to gold."

The Marsh King furrowed his great brow and peered at the sky. "I can't say that I know a chap by that name," he admitted sadly.

"He… he used to be a bear. You made him a man?" The Prince was suddenly embarrassed. The story had sounded convincing as a stone plaque when the tavern-keeper told it. Yet the elderly monarch still *humph*ed and *hohum*ed to himself. At length his face lit up like a festival lantern.

"Oh!" he cried. "The astrologer-bear! Of course! Well, you know, not too much longer, I imagine. Perhaps before you get home to your Witch-woman. Perhaps not. I don't exactly keep an *almanac* of such things, you know. And why should I? I am quite the master of my own shape. And now that that is answered, what in the world could you want with my dear friend Beast?"

"I… I need his skin. To restore a maiden to life. It was I who killed her, so I owe her the remedy."

"Oh," said the King distastefully, "how vile of you. What a disgusting operation you propose. Absolutely out of the question."

"Now," a deep voice like bellows squeezed by mammoth hands sounded across the Marsh, "my dear friend, you ought not to speak for me when I am not present. It is quite rude."

Across the long swamps came the dark scarlet form of the Leucrotta, antlers blood-bright against the sky. The smell of him filled the saddlebags of the wind —the smell of still pools of blood glittering under the sun, in well buckets and wine casks, china vases and reed baskets, the hot, coppery smell of its wetness, slowly spreading.

But his hide was strangely beautiful, the color of dark, secret rubies and garnets scattered on the snow. And his antlers towered like turrets armed with strong-armed bowmen, forking like a blazing forest. His great jaw hung slightly open, revealing the shock of white bone. On powerful haunches he moved towards the Prince, eyes all pupils, sparking like flint within the endless black.

"Certainly, my dear Monarch, I can take care of my own affairs?" he intoned.

"Of *course,* Beast, I meant no offense. Dispatch him at your leisure."

"Oh, none *taken,* old boy. And I wouldn't *dream* of trampling all over your jurisdiction. After *you,*" Beast yielded.

"Oh, no, after *you*." The Marsh King bowed at the waist.

"I insist."

"I won't hear of it."

The Leucrotta looked appraisingly at Leander for a long while. "My skin, you say? I had not heard that it had any *medicinal* value, but if the Witch needs it, I must, as a gentleman and a monster, yield to her." Both the Prince and the King started, shocked at the suggestion.

"But we must have a battle!" insisted the Prince.

"Don't be ridiculous, boy. I would eviscerate you within a minute. Just take the skin and scurry back."

The Marsh King spluttered in consternation. "My *dear boy*! I must protest! The mess it will make in my swamp! And a skin is not a pocket-watch—you cannot simply *hand it over*!" He stamped his mossy foot—which of course made no sound as he remained floating just above the water.

The Leucrotta shrugged. "I expect I shall grow another within the month."

And with that he bent his great crimson head to his chest and tore his hide from his body like a child peels a ripe apple, all in one long, spiraling stroke.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, as the pile of skin beside him grew, "when the Witch was young we were quite social. How can I refuse that delightful creature? She was beautiful in her day, I must tell you—the scars and tattoos, the way her face was mangled was most divine. The deformity of her features was as lovely to me as summer's first fruit, hanging red and perfect on a dew-bright branch." Beast sighed dreamily. "Such, well, what you would call ? ugliness' is so rare, one finds so little of it expressed as it was in her." He looked pointedly at the Marsh King, who was, if elderly, still handsome in a stately sort of way. "The way her tattoos reflected her scars, in a marvelous symmetry of black ink and punctured white skin—were I but a troubadour I would have composed *such* songs to her beauty. And the way her hair flashed! Like my own skin burning in the sun!"

Beast was paring the last of his skin from his hooves, the pile beside him enormous and deep scarlet, like leather in the shop of a master tanner. Beast himself sat quite comfortably, even redder than before, his muscles shining with pinpricks and rivulets of blood oozing out of him, dribbling like paint onto the swamp grass. The wind pulled at his exposed flesh, but he seemed to enjoy its ghostly fingers on his great haunches.

“Fear not, my little faun,” he assured the Prince, “it is not at all painful. Rather brisk, in fact. I would suggest that the two of you try it, as a fortifying tonic, save that your anatomy is… unequipped, shall we say.”

The Prince looked on, horrified, at the hulk of the Leucrotta, sitting happily before him and bleeding freely from his massive musculature. He began to gather up the skin into his pack.

“Will you not stay to hear of how I knew the Witch?” cried Beast, hurt filling his voice like a winesack. “After I have done *exactly* as you asked? Didn’t your mother teach you to be kind to monsters who completely fail to gobble you up?” Leander’s face colored abruptly and an awkward silence descended, a woolen shadow settling over the trio.

“Perhaps not,” conceded Beast, “but sit beside me and listen, and all will be well, you’ll see.”

The sun was still high in the wind-wracked clouds, with time enough before the hours became his enemy. In order not to be turned into anything untoward by the Marsh King, the Prince sighed his acquiescence.



She rescued me, the little minx. I was battling, as luck seems to frequently have it, a Duke's Son of the Eastern Duchies, the sort with ornate armor of silver and ivory. Terrifically impractical, of course, but they al ways were dandies, the Duke's boys. I had already gored him through the left side with my antler, but had unfortunately missed all the vital organs, and the ferocity of his blows became as great as twelve wolves who share a mother. He was desperate, the poor thing. But in his desperation he managed to slide his blade just under my ribs, nearly to the hilt.

The highborn scoundrel ought to have done his research. My heart is not near my ribs, as with humans—it would scarcely fit!—but deep in my belly, and his thirsty blade had not come close. Nevertheless I found myself in great extremity, stuck with his grotesquery of a sword and him ready to hack off my head.

But in the moment of his triumph, which must have been so sweet in his young mouth, an arrow shot from the trees with the speed of a heron which has sighted a fish, and buried itself in his shoulder, the force of it flinging him from my writhing body. A radiant thing leapt from the oaks, clad in mangy, marvelously lice-ridden furs, her hair a violent briar. Her thighs were strong and smooth enough, I suppose, but her face was beautifully destroyed, hacked to pieces by some master artist, and painted over with thick black marks. Her smell would have killed a herd of antelope, had they happened by—rancid

sweat and stringy meat and starvation, metallic and sharp. I inhaled her delicious perfume like the steam from cooling cakes.

The fabulous apparition sprang onto the offensive Duke's Son, pinning him to the mossy earth. She landed astride him, panting harshly while she sniffed at his armor like an animal. I imagined the stink of her breath longingly—I was sure it would have that peculiar combination of rotted spinach and boiled egg underlaid with maggoty wood that I so often dreamed of.

"What are you doing?" she rasped, baring her teeth. "No animal is killed in my wood. It is my law—all men of this kingdom know it."

I was surprised to hear her speak so well—perhaps I had hoped for too much in imagining yellow teeth and a language of grunts and hisses. Nevertheless it gave me enormous pleasure to see the Prince squirm in fear like an infant pig.

"I—I apologize! I'm sorry! I didn't know—I… I am not from this country!" he protested to no avail, as she ground her body further into his, causing his pretty armor to pierce his skin. He howled in a most satisfactory way.

"Ignorant," she whispered, pain lacing her voice like a dress, "an animal has a *soul*. It might even, on the inside, be something quite other than a monster. Who are you to kill it before you even know what it is?"

"No one! No one! I'm no one!" He began to cry in earnest, now, huge tears dribbling out of his feeble face. Strange, he felt no fear of me, but beneath this human woman he was weak, and blubbering so loudly as to shame even a plain piglet.

She rolled her eyes. "Even nobodies shall not be killed here. But swear to me that you will give up Questing and devote your life to the Princess you no doubt have left at home with nothing to do."

"I swear, I swear!" And at this concession the woman stood up, leaving the Duke's Son inconsolably weeping, the grass beginning to wet his tunic.

"Oh, mightn't you kill him a *little*?" I suggested with my best and most courteous voice. Her eyes turned towards me, caves the depths of which could not be sounded.

"It is my law," she answered tonelessly. "I do not know you. Why are you in my forest?"

"What, precisely, makes it your forest? Have you a Deed?"

"No. I have simply claimed it. Men have learned better than to question that."

I wriggled with excitement at the gravelly abrasion of her voice. "I am not a man, as you can see. I am Beast, *Leucrotta Furialis* by species. I was called out by this whelp here. I thank you for your help; it was most kind."

"No more than I would have given any animal in need." She slung her bow, a fine ash one she had obviously hewn herself from some lucky sapling, over her shoulder. "I am the Witch of the Glen. All things that breathe within my wood are under my protection. Don't take it as a personal favor. If you both understand me, I'll leave you."

"Wait!" I trotted closer to her, so as to give her full view of my color and height. "I must repay your brave deed. I shall perform any task for you, fair, *fair* lady."

Ignoring the wails of the Duke's Son, who had not risen, but sat swatting miserably at the arrow in his shoulder, she looked appraisingly at me, raising one shaggy eyebrow.

"Would you kill a King for me?" she asked quietly.

"Certainly, my lamb." I bowed slightly, extending my forelegs. "But I am not precisely *inconspicuous,* so as to enter a Castle unnoticed, nor equipped with weapons so as to do much damage other than to, well, eat him, which I surmise would be less than satisfactory for you, as it results in the shocking lack of a body. I think *I* am perhaps not the monster for that task." I looked meaningfully at the wretched Prince, who by now had seen his own blood, and appeared to be about to faint.

A smile curled across her face like a rapier whipping against the side of an opponent. It was wonderfully hideous.

"Well, boy, what do you think? Would you like to kill a King in exchange for my sparing your life?"

"Oh, yes," he sobbed feebly, "if it would please you, only don't shoot any more of your arrows into me! I have a *horror* of sharp things! I only Quested at all because my father called me a coward and sent me off after the famous Leucrotta! He wants the skin, you see. For assassinating."

I agreed heartily. "It is possible, my sweet peach, to make a great many vile things with and from my skin. I hear it fetches high prices on the black market

in all the best sorts of places."

"But you will do this for me?" She would not veer from her course. "You will go to the Palace and put a knife in the King?"

"Yes! Yes!" The Duke's Son had staggered to one knee, to make the traditional gesture of fealty to the Witch. "Only, which one?"

"The *King,* boy. Who else? In the Palace."

She was impatient, of course. For witches, there is but one King and one Palace—the one who has wronged them, and the house in which he lives.

In fairness, Kings are often quite as dense, calling themselves sacred vessels and masters of all things above and below when in fact they command a few patches of lonely dirt with even lonelier houses sitting upon them.

"You will know it," I added helpfully, "for it is bordered by the two rivers, one white and one black."

"Yes, yes, mistress, I shall go and accomplish your task. Only—I was not only sent to kill the Leucrotta. There is a maiden in a tower—" At this the Witch spat, again rolling her marvelous eyes.

"Those revolting creatures are always getting themselves locked up. If only they would stay that way," she growled. The Duke's Son blushed deeply as a girl caught naked.

"Nevertheless, she has been imprisoned by a terrible Wizard of these parts, and I am charged to rescue her—if I complete your Quest, who will complete mine?"

With an exasperated snort, the Witch bent, removed the shaft, and dressed his wound without response. Seeing her work well done, she finally spoke, her voice thorny with delicious irritation.

"I loathe this habit of Quest after Quest. It is useless and shabby as a secondhand crown. But I would do many things I loathe if it earned the death of the King, and perhaps more for the Wizard of whom you speak. I will take on your Quest myself and release the brat from her shack."

She murmured something to the horse and fed it a bit of apple she had hidden in her pack.

"Go," she ordered the lad, "and kill *nothing* but the King. Return to the Glen when your murder is complete."

The Duke's Son scampered off. I heard much later that he caused a great scandal by killing some poor, inoffensive monarch in quite another part of the world.

But I was left with an unpaid debt, a pauper before a jeweled queen.

"But as for my part," I purred, "I am still your own Beast, to do with as you like."

She considered for a moment. "Is your skin really a tool of assassination?"

"Undoubtedly, my little lemon tart. It is quite a unique appendage—I grow new ones each month like a fruit tree. Cut into strips and combined with certain ointments of belladonna and hyssop, it can cause paralysis in men born under the sign of the goat. Soaked in an infusion of yarrow and fennel with a dash of Manticore blood, it will cause a woman who has conceived under a new moon to miscarry, or the resulting child's heart to stop in its sleep at the age of seven. Yet that same child, wrapped in a blanket of the skin, will revive, so long as it forever after keeps the skin against its own. This is a particularly good trick, as the child will drop dead should it lose the skin, even if he or she should live to one hundred and seven by its grace. Ground into a powder with a handful of ants from a common hill and a measure of pickled salamander liver, it will cause a man overfond of public speech to swallow his own tongue at a banquet in his honor—there are many applications, each peculiar to the man or woman it is meant to harm. It is utterly devoid of noble uses, I am told. But I have not researched the matter properly, so I could not say. It is, of course, in demand for these properties, and not for warmth or shelter." I was suitably proud of my skin, for it made me an Exotic Animal, rather than simply average. The Witch furrowed her excellent brow, which was the exact texture of curdled cream.

"Then my price is twofold. One day I will require your skin. You must give it to me without question or hesitation. Agreed?"

"It is an honor, my crumpet, my plum. I shall await your summons. And in the meantime, I shall trumpet your beauty to the corners of the earth, so that all may know what I have learned: that a jewel dwells in the Glen, and she is beyond all rubies that the earth can press into life."

The Witch laughed, a sound like a saw cutting across rusted iron.

"Two, you must help me get this girl free—it is a silly task but the sooner done the sooner we are rid of her. Will you come with me?"

I suppressed the sudden desire to dance with glee. "With profound pleasure, my honeycomb. In fact, we may accomplish this all the sooner if you would," I could hardly contain my eagerness, "deign to ride upon my back."

"Is there always such camaraderie between monsters?" she mused.

"We must look out for each other," I answered softly, "for we are a small and dwindling band. Didn't you know?"

"I have not always been a monster," she murmured.

She climbed onto my back with the ease of a whisper, as though she had ridden me for a decade. For a moment I heard her breath catch strangely, as if in recognition of a lost love, or a child long dead. She wound her hands into my mane with great tenderness, and if I am not mistaken, actually put my mane to her face and breathed in my smell.

"It has been years since I have sat astride a horse," she marveled. I protested that I was not a horse at all, but she did not seem to hear. "The place most maidens find themselves caught is to the northwest of here, in the center of a nameless forest, in a nameless tower."

It took less than a day to arrive there, and I reveled unexpectedly in the sensation of a rider, of her small weight like a branch of holly and her gruff company. It is a pleasant thing to be tame, to recognize a rough-carved voice. I shall not say it will not happen again.

The tower itself was solid black stone, hewn from one great block of obsidian, so that it mirrored the forest around it in a dark, rippling mockery of its green beauty. The sky overhead was a uniform gray, like the metallic flesh of a cannon, and sullen clouds dragged themselves west. The fragrant pines and birches would not grow near the tower, which stood in the center of what once must have been a meadow, but was now only a circle of leached grass, dead and white. The thing tapered, as towers do, to a sharp point, giving the impression of a great arrowhead rising from the earth. Its architecture was unnatural, beyond even what magic can build, and I could smell the blood of children in the gently waving grass at its base. It was a coldly terrible place, but the Witch seemed undisturbed by it. She dismounted and strode to the foot of the tower, and called up to its wicked heights.

“Woman! Come out! I have—” She looked down at the bloodless grass, embarrassed. “I have come to rescue you,” she finally said, as if admitting that she were covered in boils. I was momentarily distracted by the delectable image of her covered in boils, but my reverie was rudely broken by the appearance of a head at the top of the tower.

It was crowned in hideous golden curls which fell in long braids down the side of the parapet, and possessed of eyes blue as a drowned eel, set in a face which was smooth and plague-rosy. The maiden’s bosom heaved in a most gauche fashion, bound far too tightly into a white dress which showed nothing of any interest to me. She was quite a spectacle, this maiden. Most distasteful. Perhaps she locked herself in the tower to save the world the sight of her ugliness. Certainly beside my ravishing Witch she was a toad, a wart, a pustule.





The creature pursed her lips curiously and spoke with a voice sweet as spoiled milk. "Certainly. Come up."

A black arch appeared noiselessly in the flesh of the tower, a lightless curtain parting to reveal nothing but further and deeper darknesses. With a knowing glance towards me, the Witch entered the fissure, and I trotted in behind her.

"I know the dark well; it and I have become fast friends. If the old man seeks to frighten me this way, he is a great fool," she whispered.

We ascended quickly, the liquid stone of a murky staircase sliding beneath us. I followed her scent in the black, the trail of her body heat lighting my way. For a long while there was no sound but our breathing, and the pattern of our feet on the rock like rain in a forest. It was not unpleasant.

As suddenly as we had entered the womblike shadows, we left them behind —stepping into a round room at the top of the tower which held the maiden in its center like a jewel in an iron ring.

"Welcome," she intoned. "My name is Magadin."

Her voice echoed in the chamber like an arrow glancing off its target. We could say nothing at first, so stunned were we at the girl's appearance. Her head, which we had seen from below, was the picture of pearl-edged royalty, gilded and cool-skinned, repulsive to me but beautiful by mortal standards. Yet the rest of her body was terrifying and marvelous—her hands were covered in thick russet fur, tapering to jaundiced claws; her hips twisted into a deer's delicate haunches; and turquoise wings jutted painfully from her shoulder blades, splitting the skin and drawing blood in great swathes. Her feet sparkled green as underwater opals, webbed and slime-filmed like a frog, yet her legs beneath the gauzy dress were silver as a fish, smoothly coated in translucent scales. Feather-fine fins sprouted from her heels. Her breasts, which below had seemed milky and unblemished, were actually furred in the patterns of a white tiger, dark and feral stripes beginning to show across her delicate collarbone.

A wolfish tail thumped unhappily behind her, having torn through the beaded fabric. The ends of her braids appeared to be slowly flapping, the veined surface of dragonfly wings shining through her curls.

Worse, all around her were severed heads mounted on the walls, what once were maidens, each in various stages of metamorphosis: One was half covered in serpent-hide, her hair hissing violently; another had lost her mouth, a beak twisting out of her face in its place; another's eyes had shrunk terribly, and dark hair covered her batlike features. The menagerie of beast-princesses ringed the chamber, watching us with eyes that seemed not entirely dead.

"You see," the maiden admitted quietly, "why I have not been rescued yet. Why nothing guards the door. They come by the dozens, pretty knights all in a row, and run like frightened squirrels when they see what I am."

I saw pity coalesce on the Witch's face, and she took the maiden into her arms tenderly, as the girl wept great red tears, which fell on her dress like some unspeakable wine. "Tell me what he has done to you," she said softly, stroking her veined hair.

"He is trying to *change* me," Magadin squeaked, her voice cracking like a wounded hawk, "as he tried to change *them*. He took me from my father's house…"



I was born far, far from here on Midwinter's Night, in the middle of a storm that tore the tiles from the roof and flooded the sky with clouds blacker than chimneys. I drew first breath in a tall tower wrapped with ivy and lilies like waxing moons, all of gray stone shot through with quartz. Wind battered at the windows; the sky boiled with thunder. The midwife placed me in my mother's arms, wide-eyed and wondering. She smiled at me, her face tired and white, full of sorrow, and died with her finger clutched in my tiny hand.

When the wild milkwoods and chestnuts had bloomed twelve times and withered, my father married again, a woman of radiant face and hair like a river of fire, her body like the living sun entering our hall. Her name was Iolanthe. She was a young widow with vast lands, and had two daughters of her own, Isaura and Imogen, somewhat older than I, each more proud and beautiful than the other.

I see you smile, Witch. You think you know how these stories go.

But they were not like their exotic mother; they were exceedingly dull and stupid, their only worth lying in the golden shades of their practiced curls. They were little golden birds, chirping and empty-headed, always together, clutching each other's little pink hands. I quickly became my stepmother's favorite, quick and clever as I was. She was an imperious woman, and my father obeyed her every whisper as eagerly as a colt its master.

I adored her.

Obviously, my new sisters hated me.

My only notions of my own mother were stories my father had told me of that last smile, soft and sad. These melted like tea steam in the face of Iolanthe who blazed so brightly, whose laughter lit the chandeliers, whose great dark gowns swept majestically along our halls, filling the house as my mother's ghost could not.

After a time it became clear that she favored me even over her own children, who grew purple-faced with hate and envy. For my part, I cared nothing for the simpering fools. My stepmother was my world; she had enchanted me completely. I took on her mannerisms, became haughty and fierce, but captivating to all. I was the wonder of the Palace, my father's pride. I grew up and grew older, more beautiful and wiser, devouring our libraries with delight. I was dark where my stepmother was light, pale as a winter wind where she was rosy as summer dusk.

On my sixteenth birthday, when such things usually occur, a herald announced at every door in the land that the royal Wizard sought some worthy young girl as his apprentice, and that all families of suitable blood were to present their daughters at some appointed day and some appointed time. Of course, we were all thrilled as lambs with a mouthful of alfalfa—each of us certain we would be chosen, and our days filled with riches and power.

Iolanthe heard the summons, and her face darkened. She was heavily pregnant then; her black gown rippled loose behind her. She closed the door after the well-meaning herald, and forbade all three of us to try for the apprenticeship. Instead, she took me up the stone stairs to a high tower, all wrapped with ivy and lilies like waxing moons. She leaned into the heavy door and it ground open, showing a room now filled with decrepit books and ancient scrolls. Nevertheless, it remained, my birth-bed and my mother's deathbed, facing the long, tapered window, smooth and cleanly white, as though it had never tasted our blood.

"My daughter," she began, her voice like water over river stones, "for so I hope I may call you, my own girl, as though I had given you life in this room where your true mother died. I wish that I had, and saved you those years of loneliness. My own blood, as you know, did not fare so well." She shrugged, raising her eyes to the ceiling with exasperation. "They are lovely girls, and I raised them as best I could. Perhaps I indulged them. They will make good

marriages to enrich our lands, but though they will be your father's heirs, they can never be mine. That does not mean, however, that I will stand to see them shipped off to a filthy Wizard with a collar of iron."

Her eyes glinted with fury like campfires on a winter's night. Without tensing or moving from her chair, she made a quick gesture at one of the shelves, and a heavy, scarlet-bound volume flew obediently into her long, white hand. I gasped, goggle-eyed, and her dark, musical laughter filled the air.

"Didn't you know? All stepmothers are witches. It is our compensation for remaining forever an intruder in another woman's house. That, daughter mine, is an estate lonely beyond description. Even this," she touched her belly warmly, "will not earn me peace. It is a son to till the fields and battle infidels, and yet still your mother will be the Lady of the House, and I only a tenant. Everywhere, your mother's shade outranks me. I call you my daughter and it freezes in the air, it angers her beyond endurance. But what can she do, the poor wretch? She is long dead, and I live. Daughter, daughter, daughter," she chanted throatily, as if challenging the dusty breeze. "In this, at least, you can be my true and devoted child. If you want to know magic, I will teach it, and I will teach it without a collar. You can learn the secret things that lie in these volumes and in my own breast. When you are captive in a husband's house, it may pass the time."

"But why do you object to the Wizard? Isn't the magic he would teach as good as yours?"

Iolanthe ground her teeth. "I thought you were a wiser child, Magadin. Did it never seem odd to you that he wants a girl, when most will take only students of their own kind, girls to women and boys to men? Or that he wants an apprentice at all, when he is a slave, *doulios,* marked by his collar as one whose power has been sold, son back to father back to father, as long as there has been any strength in his blood? He can do nothing without the leave of the King; they are bound together. And I will not barter away any of my girls to that place."

"And you are not a slave? A *doulios*?"

"No, my girl, that I am not."

And so, over the weeks before the appointed day, as the apple groves yielded their musky ciders, I learned from her—small, halting things. Mostly I read her

books. I rarely saw my father or my stepsisters, cloistered as I was in my birth-tower, my fingers acquiring the ink stains of a clerk and my clothes growing plainer and less colorful as I tired quickly of the brocades and ribbons that enchanted my sisters. When my brother was born, I stayed in the tower, my hair all dusty and uncombed. They called him Ismail; I took no interest. When she recovered, my stepmother and I spent our hours with heads bent together over concoctions and pleasant, trifling charms, and I was happy. I was sure true knowledge would come later.

Deep in the blue-tongued winter, the Wizard's day came, and I was to meet the payment for that happiness.

I hid in the stairwell as Iolanthe told me, while Imogen and Isaura were secreted away in a tall armoire. My sisters held each other in terror, huddled side by side like tender fawns left in the bower by their doe. They did not extend their arms to me, but shut the doors abruptly. I folded myself up under the stairs. We were not to squeak, we were not to sneeze, and she would tell the messenger that her daughters had caught chill and died in the frost. I peered through the cracks in the wood to watch my stepmother lie for us.

But it was no messenger who came, but the Wizard himself, his blue and brown robes streaming behind him, his long hair twisted and gray, a heavy iron collar hanging around his neck like a noblewoman's jewelry. He seemed not to notice it—and he carried a second one, alike in weight and color, in his veined hand.

"There are three girls in this house, yes?" he said imperiously, looking down his aquiline nose at my stepmother. She bent her shining head in grief.

"My daughters all perished in the first snows. A chill took this house; I was lucky to keep my child, so many died—"

"Oh, stop it." He interrupted, his voice cutting across hers like a ship slicing through a foamy wave. "I don't have time for this. There are three children in this house, and if you do not produce them, I certainly can. I can hear two of them scratching at that great closet like hungry little mice. Want to come out, hungry mice? I won't hurt you, and if you are good girls, I may give you a nice cheese."

The armoire cracked open. My sisters were nothing if not curious, curious and stupid. Hesitantly, the golden-curled girls stepped out of their hiding place

and clung to each other, staring shyly at the floor.

Iolanthe's face showed nothing. She bent even lower, nearly bowing to the tall man. "I meant no dishonesty, you must believe me," she wept, and genuine tears splashed onto the flagstones. "What I told you was true—the frost took my eldest daughter, who was dearly beloved in this house. I could not bear to have either of my other girls, clever as they are, risk trying for your honors—I could not lose them, too!" My stepmother actually crumpled into a heap at his feet, crying pitifully and clutching at his boots for mercy. I could almost laugh, but I was not as stupid as my sisters.

The Wizard seemed to believe her, as he drew her up to her feet again and wiped the tears from her face. "There, there. You are very ugly when you cry, you ought to try not to do it. Let us see about these two lambs of yours, shall we?" He held up the iron collar and Iolanthe flinched ever so slightly. "It is a simple test. Each of them will try my collar, and if it should be fortunate enough to fit one of them, she will come with me and learn all sorts of wonderful things and live a life that even a queen would envy. That *does* sound nice, doesn't it, girls?"

My sisters nodded, but they trembled with fear like leaves blown across an empty street. He approached them as a man will approach a horse he wishes to break, and his long, pale fingers settled first on Imogen.

"Please, sir," she whispered, "I don't want to."

"Well, little girls must learn to do things they don't wish to do. It is the way of the world," the Wizard said comfortingly, and opened the latch of the gray collar, fastening it around her neck.

It hung loose, limp as cabbage, around her collarbone.

"See? That wasn't so awful. You are far too weak to be of any use to me. Next!"

Isaura nearly vomited on his feet. "Please, sir," she begged, "I don't want to."

He chuckled and did not waste his breath on an answer. He clasped the collar around her slim little neck, soft as a swan's.

It was so tight she could hardly breathe, and I saw that the collar was special, that it chose, and not the Wizard, for it shrank around my sister's neck like a fist until she cried out and began to claw at it in desperation.

With an exasperated sigh, he removed the collar in one swift movement. "Let this be a lesson, woman. Lying nets nothing, just as spoons catch no fish."

He turned on his heel to go, and I saw relief ripple through Iolanthe's body. But my sister—oh, Imogen, you little viper!—my sister cried out after him.

"Wait!"

She glanced at Isaura for reassurance, and for a moment seemed to think better of herself.

"Yes? Is there something, little love?"

Imogen squeaked, and could not speak. Isaura let go of her sister's hand and stepped forward as though reciting lessons.

"Mother lied. Magadin didn't die—nobody died. She's under the stairway, hiding like a *rat*."

I believe that at that moment Iolanthe might have throttled her own child to death. But she did not protest; what protest could she offer?

Isaura bounded across the room with glee and threw open the wooden hatch that covered the space under the stairs.

"Hello!" she crowed.

"How could you?" I hissed.

"We are tired of your airs and your stupid black fingers and your secrets. You are a *beastly* girl. No one wants *you* here any longer."

"Yes!" cried Imogen in her piping voice. "We hope that horrid collar does fit you, and you go away and never, ever come back! It's what you deserve!"

"Why?" I asked, still crouched in my hiding place.

"You *stole* her from us!" Imogen cried out miserably, like an infant bird falling from the nest. "She is *our* mother, not yours, and you took her away! We were happy before we came to this awful place! And now she has another baby —she will forget us completely!"

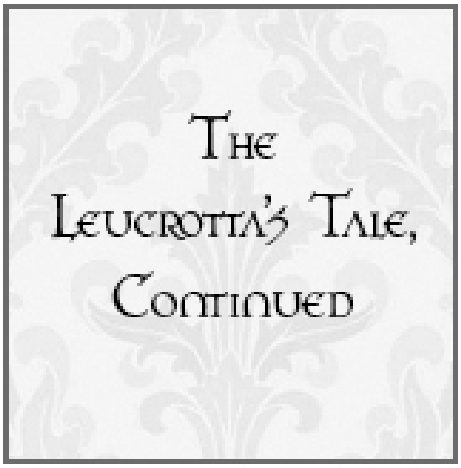
She wept bitterly, but Isaura did not shed a tear. She snatched me by the wrist and pulled me out of the dark, sending me stumbling to the Wizard's feet. It was only then that she and Imogen saw their mother's stare, cold as gallows. Imogen cried harder, and touched my sleeve imploringly. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, try to understand…" she whispered. Isaura pushed her aside.

"Try it on. Try it on and rot, Magadin," she hissed.

I drew myself up before the Wizard, who grinned like a jungle cat who has just made a meal of a particularly fat vole. He held out the collar but, with my stepmother's eyes burning on my skin, I refused to bend my neck towards it. He pursed his dry lips and stepped forward, clapping the thing around my throat with alarming speed.

It fit so perfectly I hardly felt its weight. There was no sound in the hall, but I saw Isaura smile into her sleeve. The Wizard checked the joints of the collar and gave me over to his men, dropping three silver coins into Iolanthe's hand in exchange for me.

As I was pushed out of my house, I heard behind me the soft thump of my stepmother collapsing onto the tile.



"So you see how it is," the Beast-Maiden said. "There was no apprenticeship at all. He locked me up here without even taking me to the Palace, and here I have been for fifty years and more. Each fortnight he comes and forces me to drink terrible concoctions, he rubs unguents over my body, causes the lightning to burn my veins. He keeps me young and strong, for I have lasted longer than any of the others, and he has never had so likely a subject. He cannot lose me to hag-hood. But it is not working, and soon I will be hung on the wall like the rest, and he will begin again with some other maid. I will be forced to watch her die as they watch me."

The Witch raised up the maiden's face and smoothed her tears away as though she was erasing a canvas. She smiled at the helpless girl, her face lighting like a midsummer fire. "He once held me prisoner to discover the same secret—the old man is obsessed with it—and I escaped. So shall you. Never put your faith in a Prince. When you require a miracle, trust in a Witch."

"There is nothing you can do," I protested. "She is too far gone; even I can smell that. Throw her from the tower and put her out of her misery." But the Witch only chuckled deep in her throat, the gurgling of a hundred mountain streams.

"I have made it my specialty, Beast, to thwart the magic of this particular man. I have grown since our last meeting; he only wallows in the depths of his few filthy skills." She stopped, and her eyes grew sad. "I am afraid I cannot erase the beast from you, however. I cannot make you the girl you were. These

things cannot be undone, once they have gone so far. In the old days it could be done, and easily, by any of my mothers before me. But much has happened. I cannot rejoin you to the tribe of maidens. But I can welcome you into the tribe of monsters. You will live; you will be rescued."

The beast-maiden's eyes grew large with the weight of bitter tears. "But without my beauty, what am I? I cannot marry this way, and surely by now my father and stepmother are dead. I am as stupid as the day I left her; in fifty years I have learned nothing that would make her proud of me. This is all I am, a maiden in a tower, and for that sad race there is no salve but a Prince, hung around their necks like an anchor in epaulets. What else is there for me?"

"Nothing," a voice growled from the shadows. One of the heads curled her lips backward into an *O* of hate. "You are ugly now; no one will have you!"

"You'll stay with us and like it, dog-daughter!" The beaked head cawed laughter, smacking her gums.

"Good for nothing but the circus!"

"Maybe the wife of a farm goat, eating garbage in the pen!"

"Queen of the dung flies!"

"Empress of monkeys!"

The heads cackled together, spitting and snarling. A few simply wept without words. The Witch scowled.

"Don't listen. They are already dead. The Wizard gave them voice to torture you—they long ago escaped this place."

"We're not dead, little Witch! Try your parlor tricks somewhere else! She's ours!" The heads pealed off into laughter again.

"Where could I go?" Magadin asked pathetically. "How could I live?"

"Beast owes me," the Witch answered. "He will take you to the sea, where you can find work on the ships anchored there. Or you can take one to lands far away, where no one can follow you. If I am not mistaken, he thinks you very lovely now." She grinned knowingly at me.

"Certainly, my dove," I replied with dignity, "the fur much improves what I saw from the foot of the tower. I have friends in the seaport of Muireann. With me at your side no one will refuse you. You are one of us, now. I assure you, we are gentler to each other than the wretched race of maidens. I will watch over you." The woman seemed to acquiesce. Her eyes lit like yellow candles.

“Now,” said the Witch, “you cannot go anywhere bleeding and broken like a bird who has fallen from her tree.”

She took the maid’s face in her hands, winding her fingers in Magadin’s dusk-honey hair, and closed her lips softly over the beast-girl’s mouth.

All the muscles in Magadin’s tortured body seemed to relax. The wounds caused by the sprouting of her wings healed in a breath, feathers covering the ruined flesh. Her tail became healthy and full, while her fierce claws receded a bit, into a civilized length. The fluttering wings at her braid tips melted into the rest of her hair, darkening it to a burnished bronze and thickening the mass into a leonine cascade. Her legs straightened slightly so that she could walk again, though they kept their rounded doe-shape, and the fish scales did not disappear from her calves. Her skin took on a rich, even tone, and the stripes on her flesh grew darker, more vibrant, seeming to become their own natural shade rather than a stain on her skin. Magadin was altogether a radiant beast now, her transformation complete, yet forever unfinished. I approved greatly.

But the heads howled in loathing and horror, their taunts dissolving into spittle-filled gibberish. As they parted, the two women glanced at each other in triumph and walked towards me hand in hand, ignoring the thrashing heads entirely. The maiden’s deer gait would always be strange, like a foreign dance, but she was smiling. The three of us left the tower as swiftly as foxes, emerging onto the snow-dead grass as the tower began to shake with the rising screams from within.

The Witch never looked back, but gestured carelessly towards the black monolith with her left hand as she and Magadin climbed onto my back. The tower promptly shuddered like a coughing crone and crumbled into the earth.

In the Tower

Visions of shorn skins and beast-maids milling in his mind like harem girls, the boy left the cedar grove and the girl, who now slept on the bed of pine needles, exhausted by the telling of her own story. He thought he could see the bright pale eyes of wild birds in the branches, like pearls strung on threads of darkness, waiting for him to leave so they could tend to her.

As he stole back into the Palace without a sound, he was quite confident that he had acquitted himself perfectly—even the Prince could not have been so stealthy. But as he shut the door to his own bedchamber, a brazier flared, flooding the room with amber light like a fruit dashed against the wall.

Dinarzad sat among the furs of his bed, a long slender stalk of straw in her hand. She held it aloft, still smoldering over the torch.

"Well." She chuckled. "You can't blame me. I gave you fair warning." She moved then, quick as a fly-bound spider, snatching him by the forearm and dragging him up a long staircase. Without another word she flung him into a small tower room, and turned the key in the great lock. The room was bare save for a tiny bed and wind-washed flagstones, illumined by the sapphire-ringed fingers of dawn, which pried at the window.

The boy yelped in frustration and kicked the meager bed. He let a few furious tears fall like blows onto the cold floor. All was truly lost now—there were not even linens on the bed with which to fashion a rope. He was a stupid child after all, stuck in a tower like the deformed maiden, when he should be roaming the marshes like the Prince. It was all wrong, upside down, unnatural.

The boy punched the stone wall in mute anger, and instantly regretted it, rubbing his bruised knuckles as his eyes watered in pain.

Outside the tower keep, Dinarzad closed her almond eyes and took a deep, jagged breath, harsh as a sword drawn across a thick chain. She knew she would be punished terribly for letting him sneak out in the night. Her welts had not yet healed from the last time a child escaped from her nursery. But she was the Sultan's daughter, and no amira of her standing would let terror or wounds show to anyone. She banished her tears as she strode down the polished steps, the key tucked into her robes. But when she crawled into her own bed, she began to weep silently under the wolf pelts, her tears wetting the down pillow like rain on the snow. She wished for nothing but to sleep past her punishments and wake to a Palace with no children for her to look after, no whips tipped in lead, and no prized brothers to mock and loathe her.

When the girl woke and the great wings had moved from her pale body, she saw the dark-haired boy had gone, and she let hot, secret tears fall into the black earth.

The night was full of weeping.

Dinarzad brought the boy supper in the tower the next evening, just as rose and flame were beginning to divide the sky between them. She said nothing, punctuating her exit with the slow rolling of the iron key in the lock. The boy did not eat it all, though he was hungry. He set aside some of the dense, sweet bread and onions, saving the apples like gold ornaments in useless hope.

The boy leaned against the tower wall, seething. He tried to reconstruct the story in his mind, but it kept getting confused, bleeding into itself like watercolors. Aerie seemed to have the girl's strange eyes, and he could not even recall something so simple as the color of Beast.

Standing on his toes, he stretched to reach the window-sill and peer into the Garden below, to spy at least the top of a cypress under which the girl might be lying. The trees stood high before him like quill pens in pots, wafting slowly in

the night wind. And they were beautiful, because she might be resting under one of them.

Except that she was not, for she stood in the manicured grass at the foot of the great gray tower, staring up at the helpless boy with eyes wide and dark as an owl's throat.

The girl watched him silently. It was not beyond the realm of possibility that she would climb up the craggy stones and ivy to rescue the boy, though she had certainly never heard of such a thing. For a moment, she let herself be filled and warmed with knowing that he had looked for her.

When it was fully dark, she hooked a toe into one of the cracks between stones and began to climb.

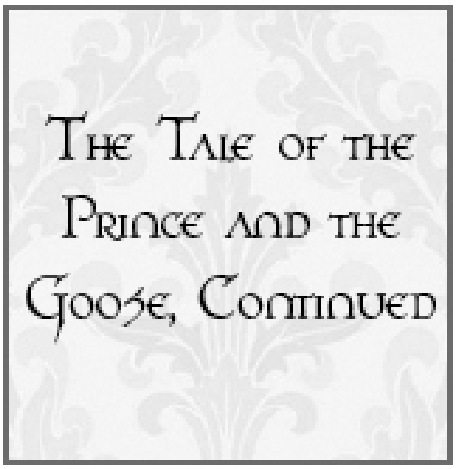
The boy heard her scrabbling up the ivy and nettles that clothed the tower. He was excited to know she drew near, but ashamed that it was again she that had hunted and tracked him. He should have jumped, he decided. A broken leg was not *such* a tragedy.

Of course, it did not matter. The girl was here, and that meant she must like him a little. It was not just that she wanted to tell her tales; it must be that she missed him, too. This thought rose up in him like a blinding sun. Embarrassed, he snuffed it out, showing her his most welcoming, yet dignified, face.

But when she pulled herself onto the sill, glistening with sweat, she would not come inside, only perch in the window like a half-tamed parrot. She was afraid, of him perhaps, certainly of getting caught. Up till now he had taken the punishment, but if she were found in the Palace, it was very likely she would be killed. His breath caught with the realization, with admiration for her bravery. Once again, she had outdone him.

"I… I know you wanted to hear the rest of the story…" she whispered, and somehow he felt ashamed of it, for the first time, as though he were taking something precious from her, and caring for nothing but the gleam of the prize.

Nevertheless, the girl began to speak again, and her voice filled the room like a copper bell. The boy closed his eyes.



"I was true to my word," said Beast. "After the Witch left us in her Glen, I brought Magadin to the village of Muireann, and arranged to have her hired as a sail-mender on one of the great ships. All told she has done well enough for herself, considering. Of course, there remained the last leg of the two-fold price the Witch exacted for my life. You must see now, that I am bound by my word of honor to give over the skin. Now my debt is done."

The Marsh King spat and snorted a loud *hrumph* from his perch in the air. "I think this is all most unpalatable!" He accused Beast with eyes that flashed like eels snapping their tails. "You *liked* that horrid human! You thought she was beautiful! It's unnatural! I think you *loved* her! How disgusting—you know the other monsters would never stand for it. The beast-maid is one thing, but a *human woman*? At any rate I think you like *her* better than *me*. I don't recall you ever giving *me* your skin, even when I wanted to kill that wretched salamander who annoyed me so last spring."

Beast was immediately conciliatory, jostling the Marsh King with his head, which smeared the monarch's wiry beard with thick blood. "Poppet! You know I like you best of all. I chose to be your courtier—I could have chosen anyone. She was nothing, a momentary infatuation—not even infatuation! An aesthetic admiration, that's all! Don't be angry. You mustn't begrudge her, when there is so much trouble ahead."

The Marsh King seemed to cheer up slightly, sniffing a little. Suddenly, he started and brusquely strode away from the Prince.

"Well, lad, I suggest that you have your prize and ought, to put it politely, to clear off. Matters of state to attend to, don't you know." The pair promptly left Leander sitting in the swamp with his breeches soaked through and a skin which, if it had not to begin with, was beginning to smell.

By now it was nearing evening, and the Prince guiltily decided that, since Eyvind was soon to come into whatever adventure had been stored up for him, he needn't *actually* return to the tavern to deliver his message. After all, it had probably already occurred, whatever it was. He resolved to send a message-boy when all of this was over.

This almost quieted his conscience.

And so he made his way home, discovering the second truth of Quests, which is that, mysteriously enough, the path homeward is a great deal shorter than the path deedward. The sun slips easily through the sky, as if on a golden rail, and earth seems to positively skip by under one's feet. Adventures rarely occur on the home trek, as if fate wills the loyal and successful Prince to the bed at the end of his duty. It was almost pleasant to walk back to the Witch, except that guilt and fear gnawed at his stomach like starved mice.

So it was that when the Prince returned to the Witch's hut, he trembled, but had, at least, the same heavy boots given to him by the tavern-keeper, which had not failed him. It was perhaps an even trade. It was the last night of the full moon, and darkness lay on Knife's little farm like a thick-fingered hand. The milling geese were now quiet, and the plow stood in the half-light of the stars like a skeleton. The door of the hut was ajar, and Leander, the Leucrotta skin tucked neatly away, bent his dark head and crossed the threshold.





Knife was not in the vast kitchen, though the hearth still glowered stubbornly, despite having long since been neglected. But behind a second door she lay curled up on a great bed, with the gray geese surrounding her, fashioning a blanket the color of waves over her gnarled body.

Leander knelt quietly at her side and pressed the red bundle into her hand. She turned her head in mid-snore and grimaced.

"So, you're back." She sighed, propping herself up in her strange feathered bed. The birds rearranged themselves, regarding him with dozens of beady eyes. "I suppose that makes you a good Prince, as Princes go. But you're early. The dark moon rises only an hour before dawn, and it is not yet time to give my girl her second birth. And there is one thing more to tell."

She shifted, and the geese moved with her, stretching their long necks to lay their heads on her, to touch her in any way they could. Silver wings like crossed arms covered her chest.

"I told the first part for myself, so that you would know what was. This I tell for you, so that you will know what is to come."



The knife cut true, but not deeply. The Wizard did not even spare a hand to staunch the blood from his own wound. It was a thin scarlet line under his chin, above the collar's iron rim, but only one line among many on that leather-thick expanse of flesh. In one fluid motion like wind moving from one willow to the next, he caught my grandmother's hand, snapping her wrist in his grip, and thrust her own knife into her belly.

Grandmother stood still, surprised, looking at the knife's bone handle jutting like a new limb from her body. And then suddenly she choked, and bright blood erupted from her white lips. She collapsed into my arms as the Wizard ducked into a small room behind the throne, servants in tow, looking after his shallow wound.

And through all this, the King had said nothing, nor moved, but watched it with a falcon's curiosity. He did not take his cool eyes off me for a moment. Grandmother lay like a child in my arms. She smiled wanly, and the blood kept pouring out of her, deep, dark blood from the depths of her, thick and black until it was not, until it was silver and pale, flowing over my hands, over my lap like a little brook of fresh water. I was soaked in it, and Grandmother reached up, her hand dripping with the stuff, and put her fingers into my mouth, so that the light trickled down my throat.

It tasted of nothing at all.

"You see? I can fill you up after all. You are all of us now, all that is left, drenched with blood and light like our long-dead grandmother in that terrible

tent. You are strong enough to buy our vengeance for us. With my death, I instruct you."

She smiled, just the faintest shadow of a smile, and died, with a noise in her throat like dried beans rattling in a gourd. There was nothing left in her; the blood-light had seeped into me and she was a shell, a hole, empty space.

I did not weep; I would not let them see it. I took the knife with its thick bone hilt from her flesh and clutched it tightly in my bloody fist.

And as I looked up at the King in all his jewels, for a moment I could see a shape just behind him—a pair of black eyes glittering amid bristled red fur.

It was the Fox, and he was laughing.

I could never discover what they did with my grandmother's body, but it was removed from the hall as though it were kitchen rubbish, a pile of apple cores and pig fat. The stains were scrubbed from the floor when the Wizard returned, his throat bandaged.

The King had never taken his unblinking eyes from me, and now I stood before him in rags which had once dreamed of being white, covered in the dark glut of her blood, my face streaked with it as though I had painted myself for war, or marriage. The Wizard pushed back his braided gray hair from his creased, high forehead and addressed the King.

"That leaves only the girl, my lord. I will take her into my tower, if I have your leave."

But the King raised a silky hand, dismissing the suggestion. I stared hard at him as his eyes ranged over my body, clawing at me, trying to gain entrance. For he had conceived a terrible lust for me in his heart, and I could see it grow like a bristled boar behind his gaze.

"You have your tower, Omir. And I have mine." His voice was quiet and utterly cold, a foul wind through the feathers of a dead crow. I saw the understanding that I had gripped like a new blade at the moment I saw him watching me dawn in the Wizard's pale eyes. It was a thick-tongued silence as the three of us thought furiously, each to gain his end.

Finally, the Wizard won through, and spoke in a brusque tone that excluded me as wholly as a doubled fist.

"My lord, may I speak to you in private for a moment?"

The two retreated to the opposite end of the great hall. But the ears of my people are keen, and I heard them as clearly as my own horse snorting in a field of grass.

"My King, I have a thought which may achieve all our ends. You want the Witch-woman. I want whatever power her grandmother might have taught her. Why satisfy only your lust? Why not *marry* the creature?" The King was silent—one could almost hear the tick of calculation echo in the rafters.

"But she is a barbarian," he reasoned. "She is worthy of my use, not my hand."

"But lord," the Wizard insisted, "to marry her would show the conquered tribes that you are to be trusted, that you are a good and just ruler. To win their trust is the only way to quiet the savage bands. Make her Queen and they will adore you for it. Even monsters are given fair hand by the new King, they will whisper. And everyone knows those tribeswomen are fertile as cows. She'll bury you in sons. I only ask, humbly: The nights she does not spend with you, give her over to me, so I may extract what I can from her before she dies, whether from your ministrations or mine.

"Let me tell you a tale to make clear my meaning…"



ONCE, IN A FAR-OFF KINGDOM—OF COURSE, NOT nearly so magnificent as yours, my lord—there lived a Raja by the name of Indrajit. He was a fine ruler, strong and just as an arrow through the heart of a thief. His conquering Hand was laid out on the fields and farms like a cloud that brings blessed rain. None refused his rule, and no voice was raised against the power of that most sacred Hand.

But still he sought to bring the light and glory of his just rule to the far reaches of the countryside, an ambition not unknown to you, my lord. He looked beyond the great river that flowed like a bolt of silk through the fertile kingdom. And so he led his famed Royal Guards, who as legend told it had sprung up from the earth when Indrajit slew a monstrous boar in the hinterlands and the beast's teeth fell to the ground and shattered. From those teeth came the hundred and forty-four warriors ever after known as the *Dentas Varaahasind*—the Teeth of the Boar. They were bound utterly to Indrajit, whose slaying of the monster had given them life. The boar-soldiers were fierce and terrible, and their loyalty was pure as snow on the carcass of a kill. They carried shields made from the vast shoulder blades of the wild pigs of the mountains, which grew in that time to be as large as the vaults of the Raja's treasure house. Their armor was covered in the blood-red skin of these boars, and they wore necklaces of the long, curving teeth that had given them birth. They painted their faces in pitch and sharpened their teeth with blacksmith's tools, so that the sight of them was like seeing a demon horde

rising up under the moon. The country loved the Raja, as subjects should, but they lived in cold terror of the Varaahasind.

Indrajit one summer led his loyal band across the sparkling river to a small monastery, which he wished to conquer and use as an outpost for the bringing of his just reign to the South. The temple was, curiously, peopled entirely by women, and it was dedicated to some heathen serpent-god draped in jewels. When the women saw the Varaahasind approach, and heard their ghastly battle cry, which was like to the screaming of a boar pierced with an ash spear, they did not shriek or run, but gathered close around the icon of their god, shielding the green-bronze metal with their veiled bodies. A few of the women did show their fear, and fainted dead away, but their limbs were held up by the other acolytes.

Touched by their devotion, Indrajit did not sever their ungrateful breasts immediately and feed their bodies to his men. Instead, he pulled them aside and simply smashed the statue into jagged shards with the pommel of his massive sword, famed in all regions as an invincible blade. Still the women did not cry out as women ought to do. Instead, one of them, with eyes as black as the lightless throat of the serpent, looked at the great King and said:

"That was ill-done. You will walk under Her curse now, for the length of your days, which will spool out onto the earth like a hideous thread."

Indrajit was not so touched by their devotion that he broached the disrespect of a woman. He ordered his men to take the women out into the forest and cut out their tongues, so that they would never again speak to their betters, leaving them to wander and beg. But he was fascinated by the woman who had spoken so defiantly to him, whose name was Zmeya. He, as any King would, wished to teach the recalcitrant wench her station in the world.

But he also birthed a powerful lust for her in his heart. She was, after all, very beautiful in her white veils, and her black eyes were so deep they seemed to have no pupils at all. Her hair fell past her waist in long black curls, and it shone most curiously in the summer sun, like the smooth skin of a salamander, and her skin brooked no blemish, nor tolerated a less than perfect contour. She did not lower those disconcerting eyes from the King, even when he bound her hand and foot. He carried her slung over his copper-studded saddle to his Palace to be his Queen.

She was only one of a thousand wives, of course, and even more bound concubines. But in marrying her he hoped both to sate his lust and to incur the good fortune of her god, and thus she was more prized than any of the wretched mares he harvested from his own country. But he could not house her with the perfumed harem, lest she incite the poor beasts to rebellion. Thus Zmeya was kept in a room all her own, accessible only by a passage from the Raja's bedchamber. Before she entered that vaulted space, she turned to Indrajit and spoke to him for the second time.

"I will consent to this marriage of my free will and swear an oath not to wage battle against you within your walls; I will bear you seven sons and seven daughters, and they will all grow to be great warriors and beauties famed throughout the wide world. I will avert from you the wrath of the serpent-god and protect your house. But you must grant to me this condition."

Indrajit burned for this woman, with her strange hair and lithe limbs. He would certainly grant her this thing if he could have her without a struggle.

"On the third day of each new moon I must be free to do as I wish, and you must swear an oath on the body of the Boar whose flesh gave you your sworn warriors that you will not attempt to see me or come near me on that day. Fear not, I will not leave the Castle nor try to escape you. This is my condition, and it cannot be altered."

The Raja agreed with a voice of crimson velvet, and Zmeya spoke no more.

Years went by like blackbirds in the night, and indeed, the strange-haired woman gave birth to seven sons and seven daughters, each with the same black eyes and thick curls as their mother. Truly, they seemed to be nothing like their father at all, but took their blood only from Zmeya, who never seemed to grow older nor less beautiful. Even when the children were fully grown, each stronger and more radiant than the last—and, true to her promise, all the girls were great warriors, and all the boys beauties—she stood among them as a sun among candles.

And the King, being a King, kept his word. He busied himself with subjugating the continent and managing the affairs of state. But his suspicion grew, as each child looked less and less like him, that she spent her new moons

in adultery and sin. She was, after all, a heathen and entirely uncivilized. She could not be trusted. Indrajit grew purple in the flesh over this fear, made himself ill with it, until he could no longer restrain himself, but resolved at the next new moon to spy upon his barbarian wife and catch her at her crime.

And so it was. It was not difficult, since her chamber was connected to his. He crept down the hall as silently as only a practiced assassin can, and put his eye to the cracks in the wooden door.

What he saw was a vision from the dream of a demon. The room was washed in the sickly light of the dying moon, and it was a mass of writhing snakes, fourteen serpents in their outlandish skin, purples and blues and greens flashing phosphorescent in the night, great curving lengths rising up the stone walls and hissing in some unnamable tongue. They seemed to be every color, iridescent as a dragonfly's wing, and thick as a man's body. The dead light of the night-sky seemed to feed them, and they danced a terrible dance in the shadows.

And in the center was a serpent so vast it made the others seem like bait for a child's fishing line. Her girth was as a Palace column, and her skin flashed in all the colors of a rushing stream at sunset, glowing with a white fire. Her eyes gleamed black upon black, with no pupils at all, and when she saw the peering eye of Indrajit at the door, the serpent queen threw her long body into tremors and screamed like the grinding of a granite stone into a blade.

"Betrayer!" she cried, and shimmered as though he was seeing her through a wash of heat, becoming again Zmeya with her flying hair, and each of the smaller snakes became the seven sons and seven daughters. They all looked at him with identical accusing eyes, hatred flaring like a blue flame in each.

"You swore," she cried, throwing open the door with such strength that it shattered against the wall, "you swore this time was mine. And now all is lost for you, wretched Indrajit. You came to my temple and destroyed it like a glutton presented with a roasted bull all for himself. You took me in rough ropes to this black-halled palace. All I asked was one day without your stinking pig-breath on my neck. I gave you all of these children—"

"Demons!" he bellowed, full of horror.

"Children! My children, my beautiful hatchlings. They are perfect! You did not take the time to discover the nature of our order before you ruined us. I do

not worship the serpent god—I *am* the serpent god! I sat in the sky when the earth was nothing but air. Once a month I return to my old form to bathe in what thin, distant light I can glimpse, and they with me, for you touch me and touch me and take me from myself, so that I have nothing left with which to nurse them. I have given you a litter of demigods, Indrajit, who would have filled a thousand books with their deeds. Now they are nothing and you are damned."

Indeed, the children seemed to be fading, tears coursing down their cheeks as their bodies became transparent, and then vanished as though blown by a fell wind.

Zmeya looked with a terrible grief upon them. "They are so delicate at this age, like cobwebs in a banquet hall. We so rarely have children, we hardly know how to keep them alive. I tried so hard, but you left me with nothing, and they perish so easily, little bubbles popping in the sun. A hole is only empty space, and I couldn't fill them up, I couldn't do it. If their feeding is interrupted, if they are kept from the sky-mother's light, they fade like morning steam on the river. You have killed all your best heirs, Raja. And you have brought your own doom down to you like a child's yellow kite."

At this she lunged at him, sighing again into her serpent-self. But Indrajit signaled and in a breath twelve of the Varaahasind were at his side, and the Captain had sliced off the serpent's ponderous head with a clean stroke of his blade.

It was the decree of the Raja that a great feast was to be held for the Varaahasind that night. The body of the great snake was dressed and quartered, and sent down to the bubbling kitchens. Each of the men was to eat his share of the succulent meat, so that Zmeya could never return, trailing that doom behind her. And Indrajit himself would eat her swollen heart, and so take the strength of the serpent-god into his breast, and spread his reign across the sea.



"You see," the Wizard cajoled, "because he took his enemy to wife, Indrajit was eventually able to take all her power from her. Make her your Queen and let me have her but once a month, like Zmeya, and between us we will feast upon all that is in her."

Again, there was a long and calculating silence. At length his tumblers and locks must have seized upon an agreeable equation. The King seemed to half agree.

"But I cannot marry her with her face mangled with paint and scars. It would not do to appear in audience with *that* beside me."

"I understand. For me, too, it is her power and not her flesh that draws. The wild people are, to say the least," he sniffed, "fragrant and lumpish. But this is no trouble at all—I can change her so that she will appear to all, even you, as beautiful as the risen sun. I have learned that much, at least."

The King looked at me across the long ivory hall.

It was dawn when they moved me again, this time into the Wizard's chambers, where he bound me hand and foot with nettle-ropes and wedged a knotted gag into my mouth. I lay on the cold floor, looking at the tables filled with books and candles that had expired long ago, spilling their waxy blood onto the pages. He was preparing some vile-smelling liquid in a glass kettle, to change me, no doubt, into some unnatural beast. I wondered uselessly if Grandmother

had been frightened when the change came over her. I could not tell if I was—my blood surged, but I was calm as an underground lake.

"It is a fine hour for me, Knife. The imbecilic King wants to rut with you—let him have his way. I doubt you will enjoy it. But you will enjoy my affections far less. I have gotten the better bargain."



He pursed his thin lips as a deep red infused the kettle. "After all this time, and all those useless women spoiling my beautiful tower, you fall right into my lap, with all the knowledge I need to complete my work. It makes one believe in providence. Almost." He tapped the side of a vial which bubbled thickly and smelled of rotted tobacco fields. "Change, my little barbarian, is the nature of the universe. He who controls the process of change is next to the gods in his might and glory. Metamorphosis is the most profound of acts. Without it, nothing grows, nothing evolves, nothing expands. But should I simply wait for nature to take her pitifully slow course, bending me to her will? Preposterous. Since I was apprenticed in the Southern Kingdoms I have striven to control my own changes, kept myself alive and strong, though I served the old King before my master, and the Raja himself before that. I have strained, through all those reigns, to discover the secret whereby I may alter myself according to my own designs. The mind, you understand, must have sway over the body. It is the province of gods to fashion their forms to their will, and through you, my little wolfling, I will become as bright as any Star. It is all about control. Who has it, and who does not." The Wizard dropped a handful of clumped herbs into his salivating brew and turned to look at me, a calm gleam in his depthless eyes.

"Of course, when one is not naturally inclined, one finds ways to exert control which are less… elegant." The man seized a rat which was scurrying

across the floor and wrenched four teeth from its squirming body, dropping them into his vial, where they sizzled. “For instance. The King wishes to believe himself powerful and in control of his destiny—it is the wish of all beings, in the end. But I control his actions as surely as if he were a doll in the hands of a cherubic child. You recall the story I told him? I told him only half—the half he needed to convince himself to keep you. I wanted you exactly where you are, so I told him just enough to present him with an excuse. Would you like to hear the rest?”

I sagged miserably and moaned beneath the filthy cloth which bound my mouth.

“Of course you would. You’ll listen to anything I wish to tell you, won’t you? Where were we? Oh, yes, Zmeya was dead and resting comfortably in one hundred and forty-five satisfied stomachs…”



The Palace of Indrajit the Terrible slept peacefully that night, dreaming the blood-rich dreams of righteous murderers. But when dawn broke like a win dowpane over the steel-tooth mountains, a strange thing occurred.

The Varaahasind, bringers of death, began to go mad.

At first it was nothing anyone would notice. The soldiers, after all, had always behaved barbarically, decorating their huts with the limbs of slaughtered maidens, painting their faces with boar's blood. Madness would have to be strong as paired oxen in them to be marked out from their usual custom.

And so it was that morning found a lieutenant at his bath, calmly shaving his ornate beard, which curved down to his collarbone like the tusks of a great pig. He was delicately cutting it with the edge of his sword, eradicating the symbol of his glorious manhood. It was against the code of the Varaahasind to shave that proud beard, the penalty death by exposure—yet this man removed it so cleanly that his face was like that of a child, smooth as a moon.

The next week, a captain was found in an ivory tub, singing some wordless psalm full of hideous vowels—worse, the tub itself was filled to its gilt edges with wriggling green snakes, thick as a woman's waist, which wound around the captain in reptilian ecstasy.

And finally, on the third day of the new year, the second in command of the fell troops lost his ability to speak. He spat and hissed obscenely, his body contorting with the effort of uttering even the slightest sibilant syllable. When

the court physician calmed the poor man sufficiently to open his mouth, it was revealed that his tongue had become forked, a deep split through the thick flesh.

At this pass, the King and the Commander of the Varaahasind began to fear for their own minds, and called a certain magician to them, in order to divine the source of the malady.

I was young then. I had just taken the collar under Indrajit. For the first time I was not just Omir, scrabbling on a farm for roots out of the earth. I was Omir *Doulios,* and if others spit that word as a curse, I wore it like a crown. It meant I was more than a potato or a turnip or a beet covered in mud. Even a slave is better, even a slave handed master to master until he dies. I wore the iron collar as easily as a necklace. It clasped my throat from chin to chest, a symbol of my servitude, polished each morning to a high shine, glinting like a sword held to my neck. I was forbidden to perform magic except in the service of Indrajit, and even then not without the observation of other craftsmen, as if I were a common cobbler. But it was better than a damp parsnip and a damp wife. And so, when I was brought for the first time before the Throne of Teeth, excitement filled my blood, after long months of boredom and the waste of my talents.

"Omir Doulios, lowest of slaves, you are come before us to solve the riddle of the lunacy which plagues my men. The speed with which you accomplish this task will directly determine how long you will live once you have left our presence," Indrajit intoned peremptorily, without waiting for the speech of introduction I had painstakingly prepared. The Tusk-Crown flashed and glowered in the torchlight, distorting my vision. Yet, I thought, perhaps this was better. For, of course, I had already deduced the root of their sickness, being the wisest of all my brothers and sisters in slavery. I had a morsel to dangle before his porcine nose, and it might purchase me that which then I most desired.

"My most noble King," I began quickly, "I can answer your riddle for you in a moment, without consulting a book or an oracle, if you will but grant me the price I ask."

I could see his rage flare at such impudence as mine, but his fear won some great battle within his breast and he nodded his assent, which could not be

withdrawn.

"The solution is simple. You have killed and eaten a Star, which the simple-minded call gods. Her presence within you and your men is trying to assert itself, to re-form into the shape of the Great Serpent."

"And what is it you ask in return for this simple solution?"

"My freedom, King, what else?"

Indrajit's brow furrowed like a field after a storm, and when he answered his voice was thick and angry.

"We have given our word, and it is unbreakable. But for such a reward you must also give us the cure for this cancer, to end the malevolence of our former wife within."

And at this I trembled, for I could not admit that such a thing was perhaps beyond my power. The stupid King had committed a crime from which he could not escape. Had he but consulted me before cannibalizing his concubine, I could have devised much more delicious tortures for her, for which none could be held culpable. Punishments have always been a specialty of mine.

I calculated quickly. The paramount thing at that moment seemed to be to give him something, anything, a path to follow. My lord Indrajit was at a loss without a clear plan, orders laid out on parchment and signed in ink made from the oil of crushed sapphires. He was never very original in his thoughts, and the only plans which made sense to him involved great amounts of blood, and never his own. Given these variables, a course presented itself, which did have some slim chance for success, but more important, would appeal to his innermost heart, engorged as it had always been on the blackest of vintages, stamped from rotted grapes.

"My most honored lord, Zmeya-within is driven in a blind passion to punish the men, the pieces of her former body separated only by a scrim of flesh. But if you were to put your sworn band to death, the sliver of her within you should sleep, become dormant, and your just and mighty reign may continue."

For a long time the Raja said nothing at all, but seemed to slump in his great enameled throne, which was encrusted with teeth of many creatures and jewels as dark as the most secret blood of the conquered. His wide face moved unfathomably, a tectonic drift of features, as he considered the murder of so

many men. I felt reasonably certain that it was not the number which troubled him, but whether or not they would submit to summary execution. These were no peasants, and only he knew by what underworld alchemy they had come to life.

Finally, he spoke, and his voice was like the closing of a marble tomb. "Send messengers, Omir Doulios, to gather the men in the Hall of Voices. I will address them at sundown."

And, easily as that, my audience was over, and my freedom nearer to hand. I have not waited so eagerly for nightfall since I was a child in my mother's arms, barely able to restrain my joy at the winter festivals, and the trees all strung with golden lanterns.

As nights will, the night came. One hundred and forty-four soldiers filed dutifully into the cavernous Hall of Voices, where whispers were amplified into bone-curdling screams. They came in all of their battle finery, perhaps sensing that it was a momentous evening, boars' teeth swinging freely from muscled necks and leather breastplates, some even pierced through noses and ears. Each wore a cloak of pig's hide, boiled and tanned until it was an ugly shade of scalded pink. They had painted their faces with grease and pitch, and combed blood into their hair. They gathered in formation before Indrajit, who stood on a dais above them, with me seated just behind, looking on their coarse faces with serenity and grace.

"Our most loyal servants, who among all our slaves have always been best beloved," he began, holding out his arms to them in a fatherly gesture, "much has fear followed our footsteps, like a graceful hound. But a cure has been found for the madness which has stricken you, and we have come here tonight to administer it."

I am not sure what he intended to do then, and I shall never discover it. For the men suddenly froze as though some black lightning had passed through them, their muscles locked in place, faces contorted in a hidden terror that might have been ecstasy. As one, one hundred and forty-four mouths gaped open horribly, wider than any human mouth. A terrible symphony arose as their jawbones shattered and their heads snapped back. I watched as one hundred and forty-four men spoke with one voice, one awful voice dredged

from the depths of the earth, dragging mountains in its wake, echoing in the Hall like an arrow loosed.

"ONLY THE LIVING MAY BE CURED. I AM DEAD. LOOK ON ME NOW, O HUSBAND. AM I NOT BEAUTIFUL? AM I NOT STRONG?"

Indrajit could not understand, at first, but he blanched like a woman and staggered from the throne in horror. "What witchery is this, Wizard? What have you done?"

"It was not I, Your Grace," I stammered, helping him to his feet. But the fell voice erupted again from those broken mouths:

"FOOLISH BOY ON YOUR TIN THRONE. I AM ALL POSSIBLE THINGS. HOW CAN YOU HAVE THOUGHT FIRE WOULD DESTROY ME, OR THE BELLIES OF MEN? BUT THESE THINGS WILL DESTROY YOU, AND EASILY."

Suddenly, the bodies of the soldiers shook terribly, and their bones rattled like drums in the Hall. Out of their shattered jaws came an unspeakable light, black and pale and green as if the air had been burned. The lights twined together, braiding their smoky brilliance into a monstrous pillar—and as each sliver of light left the body of a Varaahasind, his flesh shuddered and died, vanishing back into the single tooth from which he came. The clatter of teeth falling onto the mosaic floor echoed solemnly, and the pillar grew.

Indrajit trembled. By now even he grasped the situation, and clutched at his belly helplessly, knowing that he carried the last of his wife, and that he could not escape her. The light-serpent towered over him, eyeless, aware. He prostrated himself, the witless fool, and prayed for her mercy. She spoke again, but this time her voice, no longer contained within so many bodies, was a soft hiss of wind and guttering flame.

"I would have given you the world, if only you had been a greater man."

With this, the light enveloped him, and passed through his flesh, and the passing ground his bones into his blood, and when it left him, there was only his crown, rolling mutely on the throne, and all its yellow tusk was burned black.

The light itself seemed to pause and stare at me, all its empty menace focused on my heart, and I feared, for a moment, that I would not be spared,

though I had not taken part in the dread feast. I was frozen before the half-woman, and her stare seemed to last a thousand nights.

But a second light entered the Hall of Voices, and I was forgotten. White tendrils shone through the painted windows like pillars of gold, and the new light was so great I could not bear to look at it. It filled the Hall with its carpet of broken teeth as though it had weight, like water poured slowly into a glass. But as suddenly as it had come, it was gone, and a man all in white stood before the white smoke-serpent, carrying a pale spear, with his colorless hair streaming behind him. With a tender expression, he opened his alabaster mouth, and a small, secret shaft of light passed between them, soft as the stars in the spring.

When he closed his bloodless lips, the serpent had gone. Zmeya stood in its place, though not whole, not whole at all. She was hard and clear, as though cut from glass. Great onyx bracelets encircled her arms from shoulder to wrist, in the shapes of restive serpents. She wore nothing but these massive jewels, and her hair was circled in a single, slender snake, whose skin was too many colors to count—yet they were all pale and muted, like a painting which has been splashed with water.

Without a word to me, the pale man lifted her stiff form and carried her from the Hall.



"So you see? If you are quiet, and patient, you may be able to get your petty revenge after all. It is none of my business. The King is as stupid as he is coarse, and when I have what I want from you, I would consider it a favor if you would kill him, and release me from my service here as Indrajit's death released me then. Hatch your plots in the darkness, for the darkness is all you have."

He turned from his table with a cup of the thick drink, now green and black as moldy flesh. He smiled, a smile which might be taken as tender, or proud, had it been on any face but his. The Wizard hauled me up by my hair and yanked the gag from my mouth. He forced the brew down my throat. It tasted of bile and rotted flowers—roses, perhaps—and there was a dark, musty undertaste that might have been sweat from some unnamable body.

As soon as it was in me, roiling in my belly, he flung me aside and watched with the curiosity of a cat watching a mouse it knows it is about to devour. I screamed and clutched at my skin—a terrible golden cloud had swallowed my vision, and my skin was ripping apart like the pages of his foul books. I knelt on the floor and vomited twice, still shrieking into the stones. He never reached a hand to help me, only watched as my skin was stolen away.

I must eventually have fainted. When I came to he held up a great mirror with a cruel smile of victory on his thin lips.

In the carved mirror stood a tall woman with hair the color of young wheat cascading past her waist in glowing curls, wide gray eyes like pools of clean

rain, and milk-skin without the slightest mark. I was tall, my breasts rode high and full, and there was not a knot or rope of muscle anywhere on me—I was as weak and soft as a lamb at suck.

"And now," the Wizard crooned silkily, "we will call you Queen." Seeing my expression, he laughed. "You cannot think I meant for my King to lie with a barbarian! Metamorphosis is my art! Now you are beautiful. Now he can show you to the crowds. Now you cannot return to your people, for they would never know you. You belong to us. We will call you Helia after the great sun which rides the sky and blesses the reign of our King."

"You cannot take my name from me, slave," I said softly, touching that hair the likes of which I had never seen, save on the golden horses of my youth.

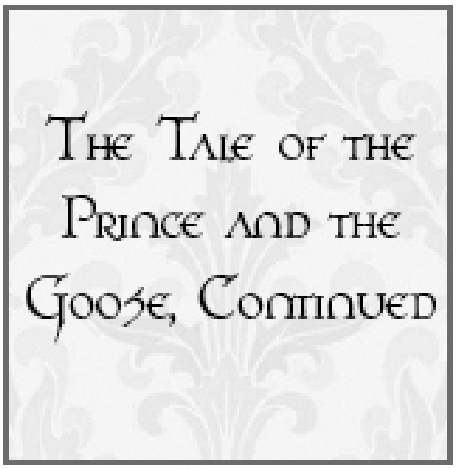
"My Queen, I *have* taken it."

I spent the nights by turns with the King and his soundless cruelties—for he hardly spoke a word to me after our hurried marriage in a temple I could not name, when he clasped a belt of gold and jasper around my waist in place of a ring: he seemed to marvel that it fit perfectly. The other nights I was bound in Omir's chamber, while he bled me in order to leech power Grandmother had given me from my veins. He opened me with silver needles and gold, even grotesque thorns the size of a well-muscled arm. But it was not deep enough, because the blood never ran silver. It was not deep enough—or perhaps I had nothing after all. Perhaps I was as empty as a hole in the air.

He would not listen when I told him I was nothing, only an apprentice who would never be otherwise. He had taken the moon from me, and given me only a sun that burned and burned.

But I spent every day in my tower prison. Even when I was pregnant, I had no respite, but lay on the stone flags as though dead, listening to the dripping of my blood into the crack of the floor.

Yet all the Kingdoms rejoiced when I gave birth to my son, named for the lions of the wild steppes. And only then, when I had produced an heir, was I allowed an hour a day when I could hold him in free arms and let my tears fall on his smooth forehead.



LEANDER STARED, HIS HANDS SHAKING, HIS MOUTH dry. The birds watched him like an exceptionally slow child who has just learned to throw a ball into the air and catch it without dropping it.

"Helia?" he whispered.

"I would have thought you would figure it out sooner. Nevertheless, all revelations are, in the end, disappointing. Did you think it was by accident that your adventure took you to me? You had hardly to turn the corner and I was there. Surely you expected to get a little further on your way before meeting a Witch? I have waited, just beyond your father's reach, all these years. I knew no son of mine could be bound up in a Castle all his life and never try to run free. I have bent all my heart on the thought, as though I were crafting a bow to let arrows fly to you. I did not quite think, though, that your first act once you arrived would be to murder your sister."

Perhaps it was only then that Leander realized the full impact of the Witch's tale, and his eyes broke like webs in the wind. He cried in earnest then, for his sister, and his mother, and his father, whose crimes he had never guessed.

"But I can bring her back, with the skin, I can bring her back—"

"Yes, yes, my son, but not yet. It is not time, and there is more yet to tell." She reached awkwardly out to draw him into her—Knife's embrace was as strange and unpracticed as a tiger embracing a seal. And into his ear she whispered, voice rattling like cattails:

"Your father organized a great festival for the first anniversary of your birth. As part of the celebration, the dungeons were to be cleared out—the remaining prisoners, starved like deer at the bottom of winter, to be executed—all the poor wretched folk who were left of my tribe.

"I, of course, was not invited to the festival or the execution…"



The court gleamed like a great iced cake, and you were bounced on a hundred shoulders, kissed by a thousand lips while I lay bound in golden cords in the tower. But when the night was full as a sail, and everyone had drunk as much wine as goats will gobble their bearded nanny's milk, I cut my ropes on a sharp stone and, tucking the rough blade into my dress, crept out of the tower, down those old familiar stairs, one last time into the dark of the prisons where Aerie was born.

They looked out at me, terrified, from their cells. I was a stranger to them, hideous as a ghoul in all my various shades of gold. I had to speak softly, to tell them I was not the Queen at all, but their own Knife, and as their knife I would cut them free. They didn't believe it. That ragged child who chewed raw meat and scampered after crows to catch their feathers could not be draped in silk and smell of violets growing in soft moss. They asked me how to tell a doe's prints from a stag's, and how many wildcats I had killed before my marriage, and what my grandmother's name had been, and both my sisters'.

I answered them all. And one by one, I broke their locks until they sat quivering around me like a flock of wild birds. Only some forty of them were left, of all our hundreds of warriors.

"I can't let you go under the King's axe like cattle tomorrow. I can buy your lives at a better price than that. Only… oh, I'm not sure I can. The Wizard cut

me and cut me and there was nothing. I don't know, but I will try. I will try. Come closer, I think I must be able to touch you—"

They pressed me heavily; the smell of their sweat and dying penetrated me like a slow poison. All those faces, cheekbones sharp and high, all those eyes, all those bony fingers grabbing at me! They did not know what they reached for, only that they reached for me, their Knife, and for salvation.

I closed my eyes and spoke in my heart to the Black Mare, who foaled the stars in the beginning of the world. I begged her for the power to which I had no right, for light which was not mine.

Slowly, I took the sharp stone and dug at my breast, cutting through the skin and into the meat of myself, as deep as I could stand it. And the blood flowed, red, and darker, but not silver, never silver.

I cut deeper, driving the rock into myself until I could hear it scrape the bone. I cried out, and my voice echoed in the dark, an echo of an echo, of all my cries when my daughter was born, of all my cries when I let her go.

Something pale dribbled from me, small drops like pearls. Nothing like my grandmother's wealth of light, but it was there, at the bottom of my body.

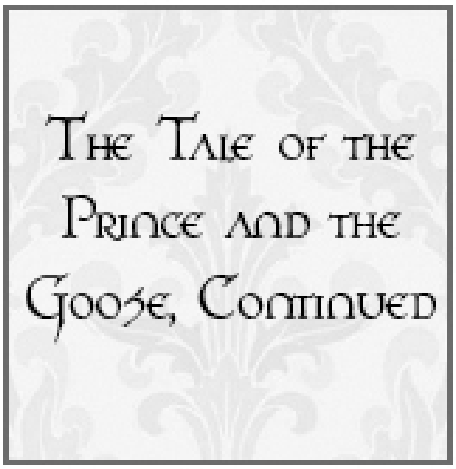
With my tribe huddled around me as though my body alone could keep them warm, I bent low and showed them that they had to taste it, they had to suckle at me as a dying woman in the desert will suckle at the blood of her horse to survive.

One by one, they took their few drops, and as they did I became weaker and weaker, for forty men and women can drink a great deal when they are frightened. I was faint and wobbling on my heels, crouched among them, and one by one I took their frail bodies into my hands and shaped them as I had seen Grandmother do, shaped them like clay on a stone table.

They changed, more slowly than Aerie had, since I was so weak, since I did not have the light of the cave and the stars. But the great silver wings came, the beaks lengthened from their lips, their legs disappeared under pale down. One by one, they staggered upright and squeezed between the window bars, into the night scented with festival fireworks, the moon under their wings, honking under the stars.



And I sat in the damp trickle of the dungeon, sobbing and laughing, skin flaming with light, my arms flung out to them as they spiraled up and up and up.



Leander felt the heat and weight of dozens of black eyes on him. The wild geese that had formed his mother's bed linens stared at him with a disconcerting light, full of veiled secrets. Knife stroked their long necks.

"You know the rest. I was punished; you were taken from me and given over to my maid. But she ran from my pyre and saw nothing. When I was left to burn, my flock came and braved the licking flames to cut me loose and bear me away to the Forest. The poor things—they could hold no part of their own selves in these feathered bodies. They didn't know why they did it, why they were compelled to dive into the fire—some died—but they did. They knew only that they loved me, and could not be apart from me. And so we are a tribe again, after all."

Leander shut his eyes against the gazes of all those long-necked creatures.

"And now we come to it, my son," she said, crossing her arms over her broad chest. "I told you that you might prefer death to any salvation I might offer. I could not buy my people's vengeance, only their lives. You must purchase a better end than I. When a knife is buried in your father's chest, then I shall count myself satisfied, and you forgiven. You must swear it to me."

He had thought that her price would be more terrible somehow, that he would not already burn with the desire to avenge this hut of birds. He felt no hesitation, only relief that he could, at the last, do something for them. Leander placed his arms over his mother, smelling her wild, sharp scent and feeling her thick bones under his hands. After all he had heard he could not swear other

than this, and he murmured his assent. She clapped her hands behind his back and pushed him off of her.

"Well, then, I think the moon has risen, and you may wrap your poor sister in her skin, so she may be whole. Don't forget to keep the skin on her, to tie it close to her, or it will be for nothing. Make it tight, for she will have to break out of it with her own strength, or not at all."

"It is magic. You should do it, not I."

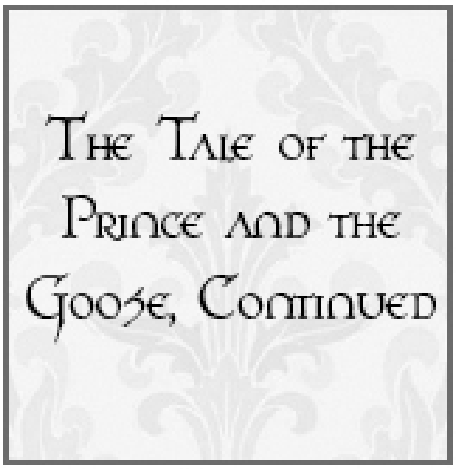
The Witch coughed hoarsely and spat.

"I *will* do it. I am her mother. You will manage the grass and leaves, boy, and I will manage the blood."

In the Garden

The boy stared at the girl, her face framed by an explosion of white stars, trailing in the sky like sea foam. Her eyes were shut; she was enchanted by her own voice, which moved back and forth across his skin like a violin bow. If she had asked him to sprout Aerie's own wings and fly from the tower, he would have leapt from the window, if it meant she would never stop speaking.

Mesmerized by her cloaked eyes and the waterfall of her shadowy hair, he ventured once again to lie beside her on the wide stone sill, and place his head in her lap, like a young lion in a tamer's trance.



Leander looked at his sister's corpse, which despite his long travels had not changed at all, had not even begun to rot—she still bore the same pale skin and silver hair, flawless and fair. When he put his hands on her, the flesh was cool, but it had not yet grown hard.

The Prince wrapped her in the scarlet skin as his mother told him. He made sure her hands were folded against her chest, and her hair pulled away from the sticky skin. He tucked her feet up and pulled the red stuff under her. When he tucked the last corner into itself, the whole fleshy shape became hard and round as an egg, shining like a malevolent star on the summer grass. He sat against a knotted oak, sweating.

Knife knelt on the dark grass, setting a bundle wrapped in cloth at her side. Her bones creaked like windows pried open in winter. She stroked the egg, and leaned against it, putting her arms around the thing and crooning quietly to it. She shut her eyes and the Prince thought, for a moment, that she wept—but surely not, surely not.

She pulled a long knife out of one of the sheaths at her waist and held it across her lap. She stared at the moon's shadow on the metal. "The skin is good, my boy, you did very well. But it didn't kill her, so it is not enough only to wrap her up in it and wait for her to wake up. Not enough. The slave never cut deep enough, never enough, and I managed to gouge myself that deeply just once. This time pays for all—deep enough to bring her back, deep enough to fill her egg with a yolk of starlight, deep enough for my girl to come home."



Leander did not understand for a moment, being, as most Princes are, reluctant to see things which were not written out plainly before him in three kinds of ink. But when she raised her blade, he knew what she meant, and he lunged forward to stop her, but she was much faster than he, and sank the knife in her chest before he could wrench her hand away.

"Enough," she barked, and with a horrible sawing motion, laid open her heart over the scarlet egg. The blood flowed into the skin, dark as dungeons, dark as geese eyes. And then it came, the light, first in drops and then in a sickly stream, soaking into the egg like cream strained into a glass. It became white with blood-light, and glowed lantern-bright. Knife slumped against the slick surface and slid to the grass, her body empty as a hole in the sky.

Soon, the light had drained entirely into the skin, and it was dark again, red against the shadowy grass. After a few moments, a terrible sound began to issue from the skin-egg, scratching and weeping, a muffled breathing which was getting fainter. Leander wanted to rip the egg open; he wanted to fall to the ground and mourn his mother. Caught between them, he did nothing, but watched helplessly, his feet knotted to the ground.

With a great crack like the splintering of a palace column, a white hand squirmed out of the egg, clawing for purchase on its slick surface. A girl emerged, her hair strewn with shards of the crimson shell, wet and bright with egg fluid. She pulled herself up with painfully thin limbs. When she stepped onto the grass, she caught sight of her slender foot and froze. She held out her hands, staring dumbfounded at them. Then she spied him standing beneath his tree.

Aerie opened her human mouth for the first time, and screamed so loudly and so horribly that nightingales fell dead from their boughs.

She could not stop screaming. Her chest rose and fell swiftly, and her cries filled the night. Leander rushed to her and she collapsed into his arms, still

staring at her hands. He didn't think she could speak; what language could she have, after all? He whispered gently to her—it's all right, you're safe, it's your brother, it's all right—and as she began to struggle against him, he tied the remnants of the skin around her small waist like a lady's sash. She slashed at him with her nails, gibbering and screaming. Only when she saw the body of the Witch did she quiet, and strain towards it. Still holding her fragile form, he helped her crawl towards the crumpled crone.

Aerie stumbled to Knife on limbs that she could hardly use, crying a single word that told the Prince that she knew language and more, the thing the spell was not meant to encompass—she had been awake within the bird body since her first day of life.

Aerie fell into Knife's arms, whimpering in a low and grinding voice:

"Mama, Mama, Mama…"

They lay together on the wet earth, and Knife did not wake.

Still, Aerie would not move. Her fingers curled into her mother's hair, Leander's hands curled in hers. One by one, the wild geese hopped out of the door of the old hut, waddling over to Knife and the ruined egg-skin. One by one, they laid their pearly heads on her body, all finding a place for themselves on her still-warm skin. One by one, they closed their eyes, not to be parted from their mistress at the end. Knife seemed to float in a sea of wings, and each bird's silent death took her further from her children.

Leander let go of his sister's hand and opened the cloth bundle that sat beside the limbs which had once been Knife. Inside lay a loaf of bread, lumpy and ill-formed, an ugly reddish color baked into the crust. It was not soft, nor did it seem as though it would taste good, but Leander understood—it was his own loaf, kneaded by his broken hand, his blood and tears folded into it, over and over. It had always been meant for this morning. He broke it in half, leaning a shaking, staring Aerie into his arms and slowly pressing tiny morsels into her shuddering mouth. She grimaced, but swallowed as if starving, and he, too, ate a few pieces of the strange food, its tang bitter on his tongue.

After a long while, they walked from their mother into the moonlight.

Aerie stood at the well, washing her new hands until they bled.

Her brother approached her slowly and took her hands in his. They were slick with red, running with it, and her eyes were wild.

"Aerie, Aerie, you're hurting yourself. We have to start for the Castle. With luck we can slip in tonight."

She shook her head violently, dark hair still splashed with silver light, so that she looked like an old woman with gray in her black strands. Her voice was like a crushed tuning fork, the dust of a harp splintered on a desolate shore.

"I am. *Not.* Going. Not there. Not to the birth-nest."

"Knife asked us—"

"Mother!"

"Mother asked us, she made us swear."

"You."

"All right. She made me swear. So, I am going. Are you abandoning her now that she's dead? It's my father, not yours. What's the matter?"

"Abandon her? *Abandon?*" She struck her chest with her fist. "My mother! My flock!"

"Yes, but this is what *my* flock does. The flock of Princes. We go on Quests. We make vows. And sometimes, we kill Kings. It's our duty."

"Not mine. You're not my *hatching*. Not my *duty*." She spat the last as though it were dredged from the bottom of her belly, thick with sludge. She looked at her brother, her eyes raking up and down his shape. She seemed to calm herself, to collect her mind. "You are alone," she whispered. "I am alone. Mother was alone. It never changes. I'll tell you, tell you why. When I was not I. When I *flew*…"



THE FIRST MOON-CRESCENTS STARVED ME. I HAD no Flock. I remembered Mother; I knew I was a no-bird. But I was hungry still; I could not think, I was so hungry. There were Falcons near the birth-nest. Slave-hunters. I flew after them, ate scraps from their beaks. They snapped at me through leather masks, drew blood from my wings, scratched at my eyes. I was not theirs. Not their *duty*. I could not fly very well yet, but I learned. I watched the seagulls and the starlings and the sapsuckers and the spoonbills: I learned to swoop and bank and speed and land.

No words, only flying, and wind like a mother.

I went to the Crows, who would not have me.

I went to the Sparrows, who would not have me.

I went to the Hawks, who would not have me.

I went to the Eagles, who would not have me.

I was alone. The geese had all gone south and there were none left to take me with them. No flock; no food. I was still small. I wandered far away from the birth-nest. I slept in the cracks of trees, in the wind off the eastern moon, cold and afraid, afraid of the Falcons, afraid of the shadow of the birth-nest. I cried in my sleep, and my tears were quiet.

There was a morning, once, when I was a year old? Two? Time is different for geese. A bird bigger than anything, bigger than a Falcon, found me up in my tree, my wings pulled up over my head. He pushed at my feathers with his

warm beak. I looked up, into his eyes. They were red, orange, white—fire colors.

"Why are you crying, little one?" he said, and his voice was like sunlight on the wing.

"I am alone," I told him, and shivered, fearing his great bronze talons.

"I am alone, too," he said. His feathers were the same as his eyes—the colors of embers, of flames licking at green branches, and his tail was a shower of gold. "If you want to come with me, neither of us will be alone. I will teach you how to catch moles when they peek out to see the sun, and how to steal cherries from orchards without being shot, and where there are fresh wells without dogs to guard them."

I sniffed at the cold air—but the bird was warm and crackling, and I felt no shivering clouds on my feathers. I was hungry; I did not know what a cherry was. So my webbed feet flapped against the bark and I climbed out of the tree and into the wind.

I didn't have anything to say. All I knew about were worms and scraps of meat the Falcons dropped, and that some trees have birds already living in them. The Firebird cleared his throat.

"Are you lost as well as alone?" he asked politely.

"I… I think so. I think I had a mother once, and she sent me away, but it's hard to remember. I keep searching for anything that looks like me. The Falcons bite me. The Crows call me names. I can't find anything with gray feathers and webbed feet and a long neck."

"Well, then," he said gravely, "it is doubly important that you learn about thieving, because it would not do at all for you to starve before you find your gray feathers and webbed feet and long necks. Luckily for you, you have fallen in with a Zhar-Ptitza, a Firebird. They are the best of all possible birds, and I am the best of them. You're only a baby, and you will need looking after, at least until the summer comes and the geese come back. For you, my chick, are a goose. At least, I think you are. I've never known one before, not really. But don't you worry, little gray-winged dear, I shall tell you all you need to know. I shall tell you about my best thievery…"



Call me Lantern—and don't laugh. I was always gentle, and my mother thought it better to name me after a little sweet flame in a glass than a fire which eats up trees and children and granaries. Firebirds are normally not particularly social creatures, but I was always too fond of family, and I stayed nest-side far longer than other proud scarlet drakes.

I was gentle—but I was also the best thief in my flock, and I could pluck the tiniest mustard seed from the hand of a princess and she would not even know it had gone until she went to plant it in her garden. And so it was that when my cousin was sitting on an ashen nest with a clutch of eight orange eggs—quite a clutch!—and complaining of a terrible need for cherries, the brighter the better, I was begged by all to fetch her some before her sisters pecked her to death in order to buy some measure of quiet. Cherries! And only certain cherries would do, only those sweet and glossy enough to feed the mother of eight.

I loved my cousin, even if her caws pierced my ears—what hen does not have the right to demand strange things when she is at her nesting? I flew off to fetch the fruit.

Now, in a land far distant from ours, which lies in the desert, there was a Sahiba in those days called Ravhija, and her orchards were as famous as her beauty. She spent her twilights tending the trees until each of them bore fruits without blemish or brown, each sweeter than the other, glistening and heavy. I have told you I was a fine thief—but none yet had managed to steal from

Ravhija, whose cleverness was as famous as her orchards. It was these cherries my cousin longed for, and so I resolved to be the first.

I am not a small bird, nor are my colors inconspicuous. It is a handicap in my profession, but I use it as well as I can. I easily hopped a low brick wall as the sun closed up its deep blue talons, and the last loyal flash of light hid my plumage from any wandering eye. My tail trailed on the soft red soil as I crept, half fluttering, half walking, through the rows, looking for a tree bright enough to hide me. I passed persimmons, apples, limes and pecans, pomegranates, figs and oranges, tangerines, pears and apricots, avocados like fat emeralds and plums like purple fists. All thick with juice, nested in glossy green leaves, swollen to full size, though surely it was impossible for them to fruit all together, and side by side, though some loved frost and some a burning sky. And cherries, there they were, cherries big as a giant's knuckles, and redder than my own self. I clipped off bunches as I passed, holding them in my gullet like a mother stork storing up fish for her chicks. I swooped up high to snatch the best fruit without breaking the ceiling of leaves and being caught. I was a glimmer of gold in the green, quicker than a blink. It is an easy, practiced grace, and I promise, my bedraggled dear, to show you how to do it.

But I had to find a place to hide until it was dark enough to get back over the wall without Ravhija spying me. And only certain trees will do—in the way of natural camouflage, the Firebird is sadly lacking. But as providence would have it, at the very center of the orchard was the most extraordinary tree I had ever seen. It was made for me; it matched me in shade and fruit, as if that tree had grown me in its branches, and dropped me onto the wind in some distant autumn beyond memory.

It was a pumpkin tree.

Or so I surmised, though all other pumpkins I had known grew from vines sprawled on the earth. The trunk was a deep orange gourd, twisting and winding around itself, tapering from a thick, fat base tangled with sprawling golden roots up to a spindle, deep grooves in the flesh of it gracefully spiraling, up and up. Branches spooled out here and there, yellow and pale green at the tips, each thick as a waist. The whole thing was strung with vines of red and gold, and from these swung massive pumpkins like lamps, each glowing as though it contained a tiny flame. The whole tree was a festival, sparkling in the

center of the fabulous garden like a dancing woman in the center of a dowdy crowd which could only stand still.



I flew to it like a lover. *This* tree would hide me, this tree would keep me safe, this tree was so bright that in it I would be as a little brown sparrow. It seemed to burn like the flaming trees of my own desert, yet the light was soft and kind, and the tree was not consumed. No gardener could find me in all that gold. I circled its trunk in delight, and then up to the pulpy peak—but a pain sparked through me, a terrible rip which sent me tumbling from those perfect limbs. I was afraid that I would spill out of myself, that I had been cut open by some wicked trident. I fell—such an ignoble thing for a Firebird!—I fell into a snarl of glimmering roots, and when the daze passed from my eyes, I saw before me two perfect feet, green as new shoots.

Ravhija bent at the waist, leaning down to me, twirling a long, ruby-colored feather, still tipped in dark blood, in her slender hand. "And what, pretty parakeet, do you think you are doing with my cherries?" she asked sweetly.

Ravhija looked just like the pumpkin tree. Her hair fell to her ankles in twisted ropes of wet, pulpy orange, and she was clothed in wide, dusty leaves that clung to every inch of skin, spreading around her face in a wide collar. Her face was ruddy, shining like cut squash.

"Why would you go to such trouble for a few cherries? Cherries can be bought anywhere. Why do you come to steal from me?"

I blushed, as much as a Firebird can blush when we are already half crimson. "My cousin craves cherries—she is at nest with a clutch of eight, if you can believe it—and your fruit is famous. Of course I could buy it, but then I would never be able to say that I stole it."

Her elfin forehead furrowed, and she straightened, still holding my feather against her hip. I stumbled to my feet while she looked up through green lashes at the marvelous tree. She stood that way for a long time, as though she and it

were locked in private consultation. Finally, she spoke, her voice all spice and honey and sweet, thick juice.

"It's my understanding that since I have taken a feather from your tail, you are mine to command. Is that how it is?"

Of course she would know that. My luck would have it no other way.

"Unfortunately for me, it is."

"What would you say then, oh mallard mine, if I were benevolent enough to offer a trade instead of compelling you to do what I want?"

"Why would you do that, if you know I can't refuse you?" I asked, still woozy from the loss of my plumage.

She smiled, and her teeth, too, were pale green, the color of pear skin. "Call it manners, gallantry. Chivalry. Call it the fact that I, unlike some, would rather barter fairly for goods than get them by knavery. The weed takes what does not belong to it and gives nothing back but more weeds; the apple tree takes what is freely given to it, and returns cider and pies and tarts and jams."

I wanted to say that it is hardly the weed's fault if its seed is blown into an apple orchard, and anyway, some plants are good whether or not they are useful in pie-making. But I thought better of it. "Well," I answered instead, picking flecks of dirt from my wings, "what sort of trade?"

"The pick of any fruit I own, in exchange for a fruit I do not."

At this I was finally piqued, and all my remaining feathers flushed fiery with interest.

"Would I have to steal it?"

She laughed, and her leaf-dress rustled. "I'm afraid you might. But at least no one particularly owns them, so the theft would be technical at best—in the sense that the harvesting of any fruit is a theft from a tree. I need the seeds of the Ixora tree, which are not unlike cherries themselves, so I would not begrudge you if you took a few for your cousin. The Ixora grow in the Tinderbox Desert, and their branches burn all day and night. But I think this will not be a problem for you."

"No, my lady." I chuckled. "The fire has not been kindled which can harm me." I did not want to tell her yet how well I knew the Ixora, how I had been born in their scalded shade, and how it was in the ruin of one that my cousin even now waited for me.

"Then it is a trade?"

"It is. Will you give me back my feather now, since we are such good friends?"

She looked at the long red quill, and again at the tree. "No," she said slowly, "I prefer fair barter, but one ought never to fully trust a thief. You may have it back when I have my fruit."

I scratched with one claw at the soil around the golden roots. I was caught, well and truly. "I had better be off, then. The desert is far away. But I think I ought to say, before I go, that I have never heard of a pumpkin tree in any corner of the world, and since everyone knows pumpkins grow on vines, I suspect you have done something vicious to it to make it wind up into a tree, and I ought not to trust you, either."

She leaned against the unnatural tree, lovely as it was, and grinned. Before my eyes—little goose, I would not lie to you—she leaned further and further in until she was entirely swallowed up by the orange trunk, and only her green toes waggled outside of it.

"I collect rare things," came her voice, only a little muffled by the pulp, "and that is what got me into such trouble in the first place."

Her head appeared in the high branches, and bit by bit she emerged, the long ropes of her hair popping free and tumbling nearly to the ground, until she sat quite comfortably on a branch between two still-infant pumpkins. "You see," she said with a sigh, "when you become famous for the variety of your produce, all manner of folk appear at your gates, demanding that you satisfy their appetites, however horrid they may be…"



I AM A TREE.

But it is as easy to say this tree is me. I was born when the tree before it dropped seed; I opened my eyes under ground and ate dirt, dirt like cake and jam and wonderful water dripping through the earth like honey through a sieve. I was always thirsty.

And one day I came up through the ground in a little green shoot. I opened the shoot as easily as a door, and stepped out into the sun, a child like any other child. But I still slept in the tree every night as it grew, and as I grew. I loved it like a limb, and it loved me like a torso, and we were very happy together.

Once a peddler came by the brick wall with a sack full of marvels to sell. I ran up to him, since I had never seen another person before, and asked his name, his city, his profession, how many brothers and sisters had he, all the things an excited child will ask of a stranger. He was very kind, and invited me to come over the wall and see what he had to sell—and what he had to sell were seeds.

Apples, persimmons, walnuts, lemons, almonds, dates, and yes, cherries, anything you can name and many I certainly couldn't. I wanted to go over that wall the way certain men want to go to war, and others want to go to women. But I had no money, being a tree only lately sprouted. The peddler felt sorry for me, a grubby little orange-haired girl with green teeth and nothing to her name but a few acres of empty mud. He crouched down very close to my face

and told me that should I like to come with him and peddle and tinker and barter and do all the sorts of things traveling folk do, he would give me a penny a month, buy me a real dress, and I could have all the seeds I liked.

I thought this was a very fine plan. I hopped over the wall as graceful as a jackdaw—and fell down dead.

Or as near to dead as makes no difference. When I woke, it was already deep in the furrows of night, and the peddler had carried me back over the wall, laid me in what grass he could find, and left a bulging sack of seeds in my hand.

I could not cross the wall, not ever, no more than a tree can cinch up her roots and travel by coach to another forest. This was sobering. I was as curious about the world as any child, and I knew then that I would never see it.

So I planted it. Apples, persimmons, walnuts, lemons, almonds, dates, and yes, cherries. Anything you can name and many I never could. I had all the time in the world; the life of a tree is long. I learned the arts of irrigation and aeration, of the tripartite field and the leaving of the fallow, fertilization and pruning, and the science of grafting. And all the while the pumpkin tree grew, and gave fruit, and wherever I mashed the pulp into the roots of the new trees, they would bear their own fruit all the year. The acres of mud became a forest, an orchard, the loveliest of any that ever grew, and at the center my tree that is me and me that is the tree, and we all grew together, and we were happy.

Eventually, folk came, and they were not kind peddlers with sacks full of seeds for a dirty-cheeked little girl. Oh, some of them were kind enough, wanting a basket of pears or a bushel of figs for one reason or another—but what do I need with money, when I drink rain and eat dirt? Finally, pressed by their outstretched hands, I began to trade. Fruit for seed—if they could bring me a seed I did not have, I would give them whatever they liked. And so my orchard grew even wilder and more marvelous, and more folk came. I learned about the world from their lips, and I was a good student.

Finally, three fortnights ago, a man came to my wall. I did not like his look, but who is a tree to judge the looks of men? An oak may be gnarled, and still have a kind and sap-wet heart. His hair was iron and his skin was hazel-bark, and his clothes were bright red, as bright as any robin who chirps on my apples. His neck, though, his neck was pale, almost blue, as though it had not seen sunlight since it slipped from his mother's womb.

“Good afternoon, Ravhija,” he said, and bowed, and I have long since ceased to be surprised when all manner of strange creatures know my name. “I have come with a long list.”

I put a hand on my hip, which had long since grown its own fine dress, though I admit I still dream of the muslin my peddler might have bought me. “As long as you have good trades, I’ll do my best to give over whatever you need.”

“Ah, there it is. You see, I do not trade. I make a policy of it. Why lose perfectly good belongings when it is just as easy to take what you want?” He snapped his fingers and a small blue flame appeared above his palm, crackling and hissing. “I do not believe that a tree needs further explanation. Immolation is a fate none of us would wish for ourselves. Let me in.”

Well, what choice had I? Either he would burn it all to the ground, or, if he knew my nature, he would drag me across the wall and plunder us anyway. I walked the rows with him as if he were a landlord, though no one but me had ever set foot in the garden. I tried to fill his list, which was very strange, and full of herbs as well as fruits, and bark and sap and bits of soil as well. I had nearly all of it; I am not famed for nothing.

But the last, oh, the last.

“It should be plain that I do not have an Ixora,” I whispered, refusing to meet his eyes and shying from the dancing flame he still held in his hand. “Surely you would see the smoke if I did.”

“But I was told that you have everything that grows under the sun. I need the Ixora; without it the rest is useless.”

“What do you need all this for?” I asked plaintively, holding back my tears as best I knew how.

“My dear lady, I am a Wizard. It is enough that I require a thing. Some are born with magic floating inside them like a fly caught in a glass. The rest of us are not so fortunate…”



IT SEEMED CLEAR TO ME LONG AGO THAT IT WAS better to be a wizard than not to be one. Better to close oneself into a room not so different from a kitchen and brew the world in a glass pot than to scrabble in the dirt for mean roots and carry milk from bony heifers and scratch at your cheeks until they were blood-run as a butcher's.

I could never stop scratching, you see.

From the time I was born, my skin peeled and paled, sloughing off as though I could not wait to be out of it, and it itched, oh, it itched, and the scratching never really helped, but I had to do it, I clawed my arms and my chest and my neck, my cheeks and even the creases of my eyelids—there was nothing of me that did not burn.

Folk gasped when they saw me, a boy determined to shed his skin, thin bits of flesh wavering on my body like bits of paper blown by a harsh wind. Doctors and witches and even wizards came, but no one could cool my flaming body. Finally, my mother wrapped me in swaddling clothes and tied my arms to boards so that I could not scratch, and propped me against our damp store wall. There I stayed and grew, fed with a pitted spoon: carrot mash and carrot soup, carrots steamed and baked, carrots raw and burnt and beaten into cakes, carrot-blossom tea and carrot-crusted bread. All we grew were carrots in our few fields, and all my days were filled with orange roots, spooned into my peeling mouth by my frightened mother.

I hung on my boards and my skin crawled. My breath became shallow and quick, I could never seem to get enough air. When I was no longer a baby but a young boy, and still hung up on the wall like a portrait of myself, my skin hardened into something like scales and my hair fell out, but still my flesh itched and scalded and still I could not scratch. The lightest waft of carrot-breeze through my window was agony, stealing my breath and cutting through my bandages to sear my skin.

"Death is at the window," my father would whisper to my mother after a meal of carrot-broth and carrot-greens. I looked—but I could see nothing at the grimy window but the sickly moon like a seed in a black furrow.

"He's at Death's door," my mother would whisper to my father when my breath came sparse and whistling as weeds in the root-rows. I looked—but I was bounded in a bedroom, and nowhere near our thick, warped-wood door.

And when I was very sick, and orange vomit trickled from my mouth to pool on the floor, they would shake their heads and say: "Death stands at his shoulder." I twisted to see him, to glimpse his shape behind me, but there was nothing.

Finally, when I was not much older than twelve, it stopped. As though some strange creature had passed its hand over me in the night, my scaly, peeling skin smoothed and my breath swelled up again, and in time even my hair grew back. It was as though I had never been ill, and with a joy in her great as bushels lashed together, my mother unwrapped the swaddling clothes and took my arms down from their boards, revealing a grown boy, one she had only glimpsed when she changed the bandages: dark of hair and eye, with skin like a drought-blasted field, scars already fading, and a stare she could not meet.

They were eager to get me working the land, as I had missed many years of farm-chores, but I would not cease scratching my flesh only to scratch at the earth.

"All these years you have said Death was nearby, and I have seen nothing. Before I give my life to carrots and cows, I will find Death and ask him why he did not want me, when he lived at my house and shared my board for so many years."

My parents looked at each other and feared the illness had made me mad. "You cannot find Death," they said. "Death finds you. Be glad we were passed over and learn to pull roots from the soil so that they do not break."

But I had a child's understanding, and in my heart Death was a tall man in black who perhaps did or did not ride a black lion—I could not decide—and if he had been so near me and seen my suffering, then we would surely be friends, since he already knew me so well. I would ask him why, if he was my friend, he let me burn and did not take me.

They forbade me, and I did the sensible thing: I crawled out of my window in the dark of the world and crept over the sprouting fields. Perhaps they missed me; perhaps they cried. I do not know, and I never returned.

I pursued my goal in a most logical way—I sought out all the places Death was likely to frequent. Sick men and stillborn children, wasting women and plague-houses and hospices, battles when I could find them and walk behind the lines in the supply trains, looking for the direst of wounded soldiers. I even befriended poisoners so that I could be near their victims at the last moment. I was resourceful, and my young body seemed to want to make up the time it had spent suspended. I was strong with walking and clever with the many lies I told so that a child might be allowed in the presence of the dying. It was, after a manner of speaking, an education, and certainly slashed and moldering flesh taught me far more than carrots and rainwater would have.

But I could not find Death.

I asked every doctor and midwife, every soldier and assassin, and they all replied the same: "You do not find Death; Death finds you."

Finally, grown long and taut as a knotted wire, I came in my wanderings to a kingdom whose sun blazed an unimaginable red, whose jungles were damp and squelching, whose King was a terror and whose roads were mud tracks through the green. Not far from the capital, I was wet to my hips with the slapping of wide-leaved bushes and the splashing of silt-gilded water. The road was not much better than the forest, and I was in a foul mood when a stranger strode up beside me.

"Hello, boy," he said, a short, gnomish man in brightly colored robes who had tied his hair back in complicated patterns, and who wore a wide bolted iron collar that obscured all of his neck and the beginnings of his shoulders.

His cheeks were very round and his voice rough as old fence- posts. He nodded a greeting.

"Are you on pilgrimage?"

"Of course not, why would you say that?" I barked.

"Pilgrims are the only ones who take this road. I think it makes them feel as though they are struggling in the face of adversity, as the soul struggles against the body, or some such patter."

"Are you a pilgrim, then?"

"Of a kind."

"Well, I didn't know there was another road," I sulked.

"Many and varied, many and varied. And perhaps one day there will be no road in the world which does not lead to our harbors and towers and chapels. One may hope. But if you are not a pilgrim, why do you aim your feet for Varaahasind, the City of Boars, where Indrajit sits on his throne?"

I sighed, and launched into the litany that by then was as familiar as my own tongue in my mouth. "I seek Death. I was at his door, he was at my window, he stood at my shoulder, but I could not see him. He has been the goal of my heart for years and I have walked half the earth in search of him—and do not tell me to wait until he finds me, or that a nice boy like myself should run off and play. I've heard it, and plenty worse."

The man seemed to consider, and his collar glinted in the sun, reflecting the wet green road.

"No, I wouldn't tell you that, not that."

We walked for a while in the muck, until the first blanched-brick spires of the city showed through the thick trees.

At length, he said: "What if I told you, instead, that I knew where Death lay, and would take you there gladly?"

I swallowed hard. "I would ask what you would have in return for such service."

"Only that when you have finished listening to all that Death has to say, you listen to me for a while, and see which of us is the wiser."

Others had claimed to know, of course, and then led me to dark alleys dank with shadows, where I was subsequently robbed or beaten and left face down in innumerable puddles. But I could not afford, on so strange a task as mine, to

refuse anyone. I shrugged and followed him into the city, where pigskin canopies shaded thin and winding streets, and the wind smelled of brewing barley. I followed him up through endless red-brick terraces and shining rice-fields stacked one atop the other all the way up thick green hills, rice-fields couched between towers, between barracks, anywhere a pool of water might stand.

Near the top of the hill was a house like an anthill, just beyond the enormous wall that shielded a bulbous and darkly glinting palace from the plain rice-plantings and dusty terraces. The house was large and might have been handsome if it did not so much resemble a man's head half-buried in the earth. The thatch of the roof drifted down like hair, and the windows seemed to watch us, shutters like lids opening and closing fitfully in the hot afternoon.

"This is the House of Death," my companion said, as casually as if he were announcing the house of a baker or a midwife.

We entered a large room not unlike a kitchen, with all manner of things boiling and drying and blanching and bubbling. The short man seemed to forget I was there, monitoring everything that sent steam and scent into the air. I finally cleared my throat and he looked up, startled as a sparrow.

"Oh. Death, wasn't it? Yes, here." And he rummaged behind a large cabinet for a moment before producing a dusty object with a stage magician's flourish.

It was a large glass jar, filled to the brim with dirt.

"You have wasted my time, old man," I sighed.

"Not at all, boy. You wanted Death? This is it. Dirt and decay, nothing more. Death translates us all into earth." He frowned at me, his cheeks puffing slightly. "Are you disappointed? Did you want a man in black robes? I'm sure I have a set somewhere. A dour, thin face with bony hands? I've more bones in this house than you could ever count. You've been moping over half the world looking for Death as though that word meant anything but cold bodies and mushrooms growing out of young girls' eye-sockets. What an exceptionally stupid child!" Suddenly he moved very fast, like a turtle after a spider—such unexpected movement from a thing so languid and round. He clapped my throat in his hand, squeezing until I could not breathe, just like those awful days when I hung on the wall and gasped for air. I whistled and wheezed, beating at his chest, and my vision blurred, thick as blood. "You want Death?"

he hissed. “I am Death. I will break your neck and cover you with my jar of dirt. When you kill, you become Death, and so Death wears a thousand faces, a thousand robes, a thousand gazes.” He loosened his grip. “But you can be Death, too. You can wear that face and that gaze. Would you like to be Death? Would you like to live in his house and learn his trade?”

I rubbed at my throat, panting. “You’re just like the others,” I rasped. “You lure me to your house with the promise of wisdom and give me nothing but your fist.”

“Oh no, I am nothing like the others. I am a Wizard, Indrajit’s man, and I am as true a Death as you will find. Keep wandering after your phantoms if you like—eventually someone will strangle you for a scrap of food and then my lessons on the nature of mortality will be, let us say, unnecessary. Or stay with me and learn, stay with me and one day you will stand over a man as I have stood over you and he will know you to be Death, black of eye and sleeve. You may be stupid, but it is not every child who burns so to become Death’s prodigy. I am offering what you want, if you are wise enough to take it.”

I stared hard at the floor. “Would I have to wear a collar like yours?” I mumbled finally.

“It is always a choice,” he said softly, “and I chose it. Magic is a many-sided glass—”

“My mother says magic comes from the Stars, and I have about as much light in me as our cow.”

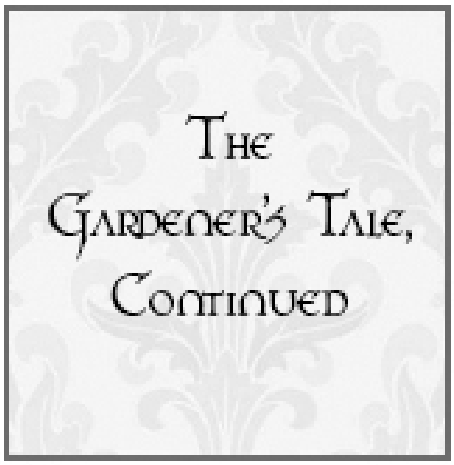
“Some believe that. Some of us, who find magic in things, in stones and words, in grass and leaves, long ago realized that it is unimportant where the leaves got their power, only that they have it. And of those, some folk, men and women and monsters, decided in days long past to trade their freedom for power. They took a collar, yoked themselves to a ruler. If you want power, you will do the same.”

“Magic *is* power,” I protested.

“Magic is magic. If you want to boil up cough medicine for local brats and keep your hair from turning gray, you’re more than welcome to it, and need nothing but an iron pot. But power, power to control one’s fate and the fates of others, real power, and certainly the power to become Death, to be Death writ

large in the eyes of the lost—well, a monarch's protection is useful, and their resources go far beyond grass and leaves."

I glanced at the jar of earth and licked my lips. After all this time, Death was at my window again, and at my shoulder, and I stood at his door, and this time I could see, I could see everything he offered.



I STOLE A GLANCE AT HIS PALE NECK. MY THROAT was dry as birch bark. "But you don't have a collar."

He leaned very close to me, and his breath was sickening-sweet, like too many flowers covering a corpse. "I stayed in that place for many years, and the plague of my skin never returned. I progressed through lessons as best I could—though I was never a prodigy. What I know was hard-won, and I treasure it with the passion of a lover often denied. And then"—a rush of color lit his cheeks—"and then I saw an extraordinary thing happen in that dark and glinting Palace, a thing I could not forget, though I tried, I tried. I won my freedom, tree-child, and no King calls me doulios now. I have spooled out my liberty searching for a way to repeat that extraordinary thing, and I am near to my goal—I need the Ixora to further my work. But I am tired, Ravhija, I am tired of pounding the earth with my feet. It is unbecoming and I have had my fill of picking through measly gardens for the smallest seed. If you do not have an Ixora, you will have to get me one."

"Sir!" I cried. "If you know what I am, you know I cannot leave the garden! How am I to get a tree that grows in the desert?"

"That is none of my concern. I was resourceful; so must you be. You will get it for me, or I will burn your orchard to the ground." He scratched absently at his pale neck. "I will make all your trees into flaming Ixora, and you with them, for I doubt you will live much beyond the last fluttering ashes of your golden tree. Death will find you, and his gaze will be very black."

He swept away with six baskets of my rarest crops and a promise to return with his dancing blue flame in the fall. He swept away, and I stood helpless at the wall.



"What a beastly man," I breathed.

Ravhija nodded miserably, stepping down from her branch. "And the summer is almost through, and I with no Ixora. No surprise, really. I have asked for it in trade, but no man is brave enough to reach into the heart of a burning tree just to pull me out a little berry."

"No man," said I, moved as a rock rolled aside from a cave, "but a bird may, and there can be no bird more suited to the Torch-Trees than I. You do not know how simple a thing this is! The Ixora are my home, and to take a few flinty fruits is as easy as picking corn out of a basket! Even if you did not hold my feather, beautiful mistress of pumpkins, I would go, and happily, to the desert for you."

With glittering green tears in her eyes, Ravhija kissed my downy cheek, and reminded me to wait until the tree had nearly died before prodding about in the ash. She needed at least three, she said, but I could have all the fruit I wanted when I returned. She clucked behind me like a mother sending her boy to school, pointing out this and that and warning me not to scorch myself, though that last was hardly needed. I nibbled at her ropy hair in farewell—this means affection, gray-cheeked girl.

It tasted just exactly like pumpkin.

It is a long flight into the desert. Many countries are crossed, and their colors are as varied as a jester's coat. I watched them fold and unfold underneath me. One by one, they all turned thirsty, turned empty, turned to sand. But even when one has crossed the line in the earth that separates the green from the desert, there is still farther to go to the white sands and salt flats where the Ixora grow.

I know the land very well.

But once I crossed the last of the green lands, I knew I was followed. Little gosling, I will teach you this, too. It is a quiet, subtle thing, to know when you have an uninvited companion, but any bird should know it as surely as he knows which wind will take him into the clouds, and which down to the water. But I had never been hunted as surely as this. The hunter's footsteps were lighter than breath, and though sometimes I thought I saw him, a speck on the land below me, more often I felt him beside me in the air, and I was unnerved.

Knowing I was hunted, I could not go to my cousin's nest-side and nuzzle her before collecting the cherries. I did not know what other part of the forest might be ready to seed. I circled for days, the strange hunter close behind me, avoiding any place I knew a Firebird to nest. It made for a curling, snarled path through the fiery groves, and I lost many days to it. Finally, circling back to the salt flats, I saw what I wanted, laid out like a feast on the white ground.

I am not a stupid bird. The hunter had laid me a trap that, even had I not been sent by the beautiful pumpkin-girl, would have been hard to resist—what does anyone like better than their mother's own dish? I looked down at the fruit, the dozens of cherries that might have quickened a whole forest, and it was like tearing myself in two to turn away from them. But turn away I did.

And it was strange, but the feeling of being hunted did not follow me into the forest. It was gone, vanished like a breeze in a storm. There was no one around me, whatever had stalked me had lost my scent or given up, and it was no matter which, for I could finally go to my cousin's side, and spill what few cherries I had kept in my gullet onto her nest-stoop like a stork vomiting fish. She pecked at it, but her meal was bitter. She wept and wept and could not stop, her tears like burning oil blackening the sand below her ashen nest.

"Lantern, the chicks," she gasped through her sobs, "the chicks, he took them all."

"What?" I cried. "Who took them? What do you mean, cousin? Your eggs are still there, I can see their colors under your down! Stop crying and tell me what happened!"

Sniffling, she whispered in terror, "A thing came into the desert, and he was all white, and he smelled of scorched bread and copper filings, and he went into every dying tree that might have been a nest, and pulled out the sap, and pulled out the seed." I choked in horror. "And as if that was not enough, he fed the meat to his women, and piled the seeds up like trash." She burst into a storm of weeping again, and her breast shook so hard I feared her eggs would crack. "They kicked them over," she murmured, so soft I could barely hear. "The women kicked them over like a child's marbles, and there were no eggs for them to strike. It will be years before any other hen will lay her nest."

I held my cousin in her grief and reeled in my own. Of course, you could not understand, poor gray-heart. It is our greatest secret, and I tell you now so that you will trust me to never withhold wisdom when I have it to give. My cousin's eggs have no rooster; they are quickened by the dying tree. The flint-seeds spark the new tree, yes, but also the new bird, and the first roots of the new Ixora are born out of the egg with the chick. The flint must have *something* to catch its spark—it must have both feather and bark. We need each other, you see. The Zhar-Ptitza drakes only protect the nest. We are like bees—we cannot mate, at least not with our hens. I have heard that some few once managed to pull eggs from a tree and fire them with their own skin, but even their names are lost to ash now. All my family is mothers, brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, and uncles—and no fathers. There will never be chicks which are mine. The Ixora is the other half of us.

So you see why it is that I answered Ravhija so readily, even though it meant giving her three seeds which might have been three Firebirds. Why, I would have done as she asked even without the feather. I thought, I hoped that if my cousin could hatch a tree's eggs, perhaps a tree—but that doesn't matter now.

There was nothing I could do. I had to wait. The clutch was born and there can be nothing finer than eight new Firebirds cracking their shells, but they, and I, had to wait until the next crop of Ixora went to ash before their black little bodies could burst into flame, before the other hens could quicken their eggs in the flood of sap, before Ravhija's seeds could be spared.

It was five years before I had what she needed. I flew back over the countries, which changed from gold to green under me, sick and as full of dread as a hive of honey. I told myself that she had found some other source, that she had found the strange hunter some morning at her wall, who happily gave over the little red seeds. Someone, I told myself, will surely have saved her. She will wave happily from her tree, and her orange hair will shine in the sunlight, and she will tell me it was all right, don't be silly, it all turned out well in the end.

But I knew it was a lie. The orchard was black as a chimney when I finally found it, the wall smashed and crumbled. The trees were stark skeletons against a gray and brooding sky—nothing grew; there was no fruit, only a mash of dead sweetness that had once boiled glazing the earth. It was all gone, all gone. I flew over the wreckage and I could hardly keep myself in the sky, so great was my guilt, hanging around my neck like an anchor.

Except that it was not quite all gone. In the center of the garden, where that beautiful tree that had filled me with secret hope had stood, there was a slender green sapling, almost too pale to see when the sun was behind it.

Beside it sat a little girl playing in the scorched soil.

"Oh!" she cried out when she saw me. "Aren't you a pretty bird!"

I landed next to her, my blazing tail dragging in the ash of the old tree. "Ravhija?" I asked, nosing her uncertainly.

"Oh, no, I'm Ravhi!" she cried, bouncing up to stroke my feathers like any other delighted child. She beamed up at me through green lashes; her hair was short, but already twisted into little ropes of pulpy orange.

Of course I understood. No child of an Ixora could miss it—the tree had dropped its seeds in the earth, and no soil is richer than that of a forest after a fire. A new tree had been born, and a new mistress.

I gave her the seeds. It was all I could do.

She thought they were very pretty.

The Gosling's Tale, Continued

"But your feather," I whispered, as a cold and snowy lake country fluttered below us like a huge white flock.

Lantern shook his glittering head. "Ravhi didn't have it, and it was no use asking her where it went—she remembered nothing of the old tree, or the old gardener. I think the Wizard must have taken it when he played Death. I feel it still, like an eye or an ear I have misplaced. It was not burned, but it is not near, and no one has called me with it."

I flew a little closer to the warm bird, basking in his heat. Snow melted from my beak. "I'm sorry she couldn't nest with you, like you wanted," I said bashfully.

He smiled and squinted in the flying flakes. "Drakes aren't meant to nest. It was a silly hope. And if she had, we should never have met, little web-foot, and that would have been very sad."



He flew with me all winter and into the spring, fed me grasses and mice and dandelion heads, until I grew, and my neck was long. When the geese came back, I did not want to go with them, and he did not make me go. I flew under his wings, which were wide as sunset clouds, as chapel doors or cedar shades, and I was safe from Falcons. Together we crossed the wide purple sea and back again, and rested in the fronds of palm trees. He taught me many songs and the language of the Starlings, and the Storks, and the Seagulls. And he did teach me to steal as well as any burglar. I never wanted for cherries.

For us there was no time, only the flying, and the clouds in our mouths. I was happy. I was his. We needed no others. I did not cry. But after two summers I saw that the trees were familiar, and the shadows of the birth-nest were again on the horizon. I shivered in fear.

"I have brought you back home, little one," Lantern said, "for there is a new flock, and they are calling on the moon and sun to find you."

"I want to stay with you." I wept, and he held me in his wings, which were as the evening sky closing over me.

He shifted wretchedly from foot to foot. "We are not the same, gray-heart. Only those who share feather and beak can remain together always. Maybe I shouldn't have taken care of you at all, but you were so poor, and so dear, and I have never had a chick to love. You will be all right now, I know it. You should have a flock, and a nest. I could give you only a burning tree and cold fruit. And… there is something pulling at me, here, like a finger hooked into my breastbone. My feather wants me, and I cannot refuse."

"But I don't want a new flock! And you can refuse; you can turn around and fly the other way as fast as you can."

He sighed, and even his brilliant colors, his oranges and golds that lit my world, seemed muted and dull. "It isn't like that, my love. When my feather calls, I have to go. I can no more fly in the other direction than I can fly underwater."

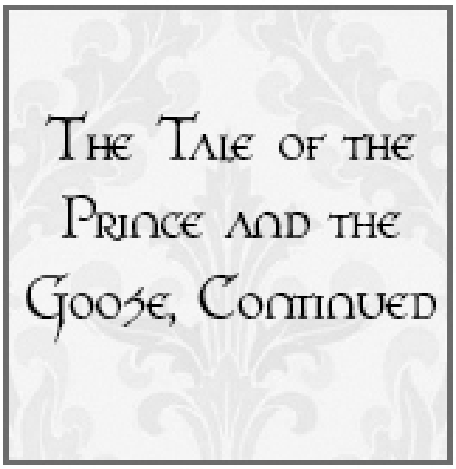
I still did not cry, but it was very hard. We perched on a crooked oak stump outside a great courtyard, and something was there, on the cobblestones, something that smelled like memory. A curl of smoke was rising from it, smoke, and then bright fire, sparking in the morning fog.

"We are not the same," Lantern repeated, "but there is fire, and you can go towards it without dread, and be born again with your own birds, born in fire just like me. There will be a little of what made me, in you."

The smell pulled at me—I knew it, I knew it, and the air above the pyre was now filled with birds, birds with the maddening, wonderful smell on their wings. It was like horses, horses and milk and damp, dark rooms.

It was my mother's smell, and Lantern put his hearth-warm head to my back and pushed me towards it. I flapped my wings slowly and glided into the mist. I did not look behind me; I knew he did not want me to, and there was Mother before me, Mother, whom I had given up all hope of finding. But it was as though my own feathers were ripped from me, each dripping with dark blood.

When my mother burned, I was not afraid. I cut her bonds with my mouth and kissed her flaming lips. All around me were birds that looked just like me, with long necks and gray feathers and webbed feet. They were my flock, they knew me for their own, and she was my flock, and I loved her. I felt no fire, only the path to her, and I helped her rise up from the ash, just as Lantern must have risen when he was a little black chick; I helped her rise up and steal away into the night.



"I WAS THEIRS. I AM NOT YOURS. ONLY FLOCK CARES for flock." Aerie looked at him with her large black eyes, full of mourning and distrust.

"But we are family; we are the same… clutch," Leander protested quietly.

"We are not the same. Your father you will put under the claw. He is not *my* father."

Leander's cheeks darkened. His father's face floated in his vision, and he felt no love for it. "He harmed our mother. And all her people. He destroys everything."

"Why should I care what is done on the earth? This is not my place. I belong to the air. I belong to all these ghosts."

"Aerie, you are a woman now; you are on the earth, both feet. You cannot ignore it because you remember when they were wings."

"He is not my father, not my duty," she insisted, staring at the moon-speckled grass.

"No. But it is our mother, and she gave you the wind and the clouds so you could live. I have done so much wrong, Aerie. All I wanted was a Quest—and this one has led only back to the Castle I wished to escape. But if that is what is written, that is what is written. And it is written that because we left the Castle separately, we must return together. There is the Wizard to think of, who killed our grandmother and ravaged her bones. All this is ours, the nest that made us. I am yours. You are *my* duty. Come with me."

Leander put his hand out to her, glimmering in the dark, and slowly, she clasped it with her own, still streaked in blood. “Grandmother,” she whispered, “and the flock that once had no wings.”

Journeying back towards the Castle, Leander marveled that Aerie could move entirely without sound. Her feet made no impact on the earth as they ran from the Witch’s Glen, back and back and back towards the place of their birth.

Of course the guards let Leander through—though he had been missing he was certainly not banished, and they took Aerie for a plaything he had brought home. It was simple as a child’s wooden blocks. They crept through the upper rooms, past door after door bolted with great brass locks. Suddenly, the Prince stopped.

“Wait,” he whispered, and disappeared behind one of the heavy doors. It was his own bedroom, and Leander stood within it as though he had never seen it before. He was not the man who had slept here; what he knew could not live in these velvet walls. He shook his head, trying to hold to his purpose.

“It is the function,” he told himself silently, “of a Prince to kill monsters. If the derivative of a Prince is set to zero, the kingdom survives.”

He straightened his spine and opened the carved teak table beside his brocade bed. He had what he had come for. From the drawer he drew a long silver knife with a curving handle of bone. It shone now with a pure light; it glimmered in his mind, heavy with meaning. He had taken it as a child for a toy, from the heaps of knives and daggers and stilettos in the vaults. It had called to him, and in the blade he felt uneasily that he had no choice in the story of this night, that he had strained towards it all his life, and never of his own will.

“Come on,” he said to his sister, whose eyes were beginning to take on the panting sheen of the hunt, “we will go to the Wizard first.”

They slipped through the door that led into the Wizard’s quarters—easily picked, easily entered. It should not be so easy, he thought. Killing should be hard and horrible work, not like this, less effort than drawing water from a well. It had no right being anything but thudding and blood and cries. But there was no sound save the heavy breathing of Aerie behind her brother. She

saw the knife glinting at his belt and had already resolved to steal it. She could wait.

The Wizard Omir lay peacefully, prone as a baby, sleeping among white furs, his lips still full and firm. But the rest of him had long ago slid into old age swiftly as a knife slides through ribs. Leander had seen this man nearly every day of his life, but now he saw how deep the lines and wrinkles ran, how terrible the sores were that strange, hidden experiments had inflicted on his flesh. He remembered those sallow, piscine eyes always watching him, and he remembered the tale his mother told him, how Omir had killed Grandmother Bent-Bow with as little thought as baiting a hook. He reached for the knife, certain that he could do the deed.

But the blade was gone.



Aerie sat perched on one of the high tables with its gnarled wood. She breathed in long, sighing gasps, and in her pale fist was the bone-handled knife. She must have known it from the moment she saw it—known it for her own, for her grandmother's blade. It must have called to her like a feather, and now they were together, knife and woman, and Leander could not stand before them.

With a soft cry, no more than a gosling gives upon seeing its flock in the distance, she fell on the sleeping form of the Wizard, plunging the knife into him. The old man opened his rheumy eyes in time to behold her, hair streaming, skin flushed with fury and triumph. She leaned down close to him, as though she were going to kiss his rasping lips, and whispered sinuously in his withered ear:

"Death has found you."

Omir saw her, the bird-maiden, crouching over him like a nightmarish falcon, her eyes burning in her skull.

"I knew!" he breathed, choking as she twisted the knife in him. "I knew she could do it! The Witch, she lied, but I knew!"

Slowly, Aerie touched his face, gently, like a child. Her nails parted his flesh easily, as though it were water. She put her fingers to her mouth and sucked greedily at his blood.

"Slave," she hissed, "always a slave, whispering in the dark, stealing what isn't yours."

"Perhaps… perhaps he should not be blamed," Leander murmured. "My father, after all, was the one who commanded him."

Aerie did not hear him. Omir chuckled, and blood spattered his chin. "Your father is a fool among fools. And the girl knows, she knows, she knows. Her mother told her about the tower, she knows I did much that was not commanded. But she won't kill me. She knows that I hear tales, too, and I know about her Firebird and how he left her; she knows I had his feather. I kept him in this very room, in an ivory cage."

Aerie's eyes narrowed to silver slivers. Omir tried to sit up, but was pinned by the blade, and simply collapsed again in another fit of coughing. "Oh, yes, girl, just over there, in the corner."

She leaned on the bone hilt, and for the first time, Omir cried out, with real anguish, his white eyebrows arching, his lips peeling back from his teeth. "Where is he?" she growled.

"I don't… I don't have him. I swear it. I sold him, him and his feather and his cage, to a man in the city of Ajanabh, I sold him, I sold him, I swear. Please." The Wizard's hands flapped uselessly at the knife. "But listen to me, listen! After all these years I have the secret: I can make you a Firebird; I can make any willow into an Ixora for you, light your wings, and send you to him. I can even change you so that he can quicken your nest, and you will never need the trees. But if you kill me, you will remain this wretched girl, and never fly again, and you'll never find him without me. You will stay in this awful body, with only your little brother to keep you company—and I assure you, he is dreadful company."

Aerie was weeping, her tears falling on the Wizard's weak hands. Her shoulders shook like bare branches, and she looked at him with a terrible hope flaming in her dark eyes. She leaned in, very close, and put her arms around the old man. Through his rattling cough and the dark stain spreading across his belly, he tried to pat her back paternally. He could only manage to lift his

arm once and let it flop back to the bed. But he could still speak, and his voice was like leeches suckling.

"There, there, your uncle will make all things well, you'll see. No need to speak; I already know what you want, love. All manner of things will be well."

Aerie raised her silvery head and whispered in his ear. *"Mother."*

Then Aerie, who had never had hands since her first breath, seized him by the scalp in an expert fist, snatched the knife from his belly, and cut his throat.

The blood was hot and thick, and though it flowed over her hands like mud, Aerie would not let go of the knife. Leander could not pry it from her fingers. He pulled her from the corpse and into the hall—her eyes glittered brightly, ecstatic, wild.

They would never be admitted to the King's quarters at night, so they inched across the stone wall windowsill by windowsill, ivy-covered stair, and finally mere toe-holds in the granite. Finally, they crouched below the King's window, and Leander looked at his sister meaningfully before he swung up and into the chamber. She was not to follow.

So, of course, she slid in behind him as noiselessly as the space between breaths.

The King lay on his bed, alone, still robust and strong, perfectly awake. He turned to his son.

"Certainly I have taught you better than to eschew the use of doors."

Leander expected nothing less at this point, but covered his fear with a blank face. "It seemed the best plan."

"Did it now? And I see you have brought the poor little bird with you. All the masks off, then?" His eyes did not blink, nor shift to Aerie even for a moment. She was nothing to him; she didn't matter.

"If the derivative of a Prince is set to zero, the kingdom survives," Leander whispered.

"What nonsense are you spouting, boy? Did that foul Witch find you at last? She was never worth the price of her bedding. A pity the fire could not be extended indefinitely. Executions must always be handled personally; remember that, when you are King, my son."

"I will not be King. I will kill you here where you lie for what you have done to my mother's people, for what you have made me do to countless others like her when the men rode out under white flags."

The King laughed, low and hooting. "Oh, my son, my son. How do you think *I* became King? I, too, cut out my father's heart while he slept…"



His face was so fat on the pillow. Like a slab of meat on a white tablecloth, all spidery red blood vessels and swollen nose. He hadn't slept in the same bed with my mother for years—but then, no one did. I think I would have actually preferred it if she had had a lover. It would have meant she was human. But she never let anyone between her legs; she spent every night in a shabby old bed in a shabby old tower, and my father slept in the great ebony four-poster bed that was meant for the lord and his lady.

Didn't you know? My father was never King.

A country Baron at best—some winters, the pigs and cows slept in the great hall to keep them from keeling over in the frost. The stink of it reached the rafters and hung there like a dung-spattered chandelier. My mother was better than that. I was better than that. I used to watch her, her profile against her window, and wonder how she ever married the sack of onions and pig snouts I called a father. I heard from servants that he wasn't always so useless. Before my mother shut up her mouth with grief, this was a rich place, and the cows slept in the grass where they belonged.

But things were as they lay. She never said anything. She never said a word. My mother had kept silent as a nun since the day my sister was taken from her.

I was an infant when she vanished from us; I never knew that sister. But her absence stalked the house like a hungry dog. The hole where she had been took up space at our dinner table, it sagged and slumped in the musty air, it ate and drank and breathed down all of our necks.

My other sisters were married off before I could manage arithmetic. I grew up alone in that silent house with nothing but the stinking cows and my mute mother and the hole. Even my father didn't want to spend his days there; he stayed in the fields directing hay-rolling and goat-breeding until it was dark enough to slip back inside without anyone bothering him. But still, the hole answered the bell when he rang, and he had to scurry to bed with his head down to avoid looking it in the eye.

I didn't think anyone would miss him. He was a fool now, feeble as a sheep after shearing, and I was well into manhood, ready to be Baron, hungry for it, tired of the ramshackle place falling down around us, propped up only by a hole in the air, by empty space. Dirt-farming squalor like my father always has a kind of rude health, and I knew if I wanted a Barony, I would have to take it.

I wasn't even very quiet going up the stairs to his room. I stomped like anything—in that dead house, who would care if one more dead thing turned belly-up by morning? But the hole was there. I could feel it, tugging at my sleeves with sisterly disapproval. If she had been there, the hole sighed sadly, there would have been no silence, and I wouldn't need to hear my own father's screaming just to know I was alive. The hole was sorry for me, and I hated it.

But he didn't scream. It was as easy as cutting meat for a roast. I didn't even think when I slid the knife into his ox-huge heart. I just did it, and it seemed like the most natural thing in the world. Killing, I thought, should be harder than this. His eyes flapped open, and he gurgled a little, no more than a calf will when you cave in its skull for the summer banquets. He didn't scream; I wasn't alive.

But I was Baron.

Mother watched me coming down the stairs, wiping blood on my trousers. She stared, and her mouth was thin and colorless, but she said nothing. She never did.

The Barony was better for my hand, as I knew it would be. The fields gave grain, the trees gave cider, the pigs slept in the penned muck and grew sweet with fat. The dust was swept from every corner of the great hall, and long white banners were hung from the well-scrubbed rafters. Folk came to the

Castle again, and there was music and dancing when the summer broke the spring.

The hole never came back.

Finally, it came time to choose a wife. I didn't really care, but I was told it was the lordly thing to do, and already I was considering how to move myself into a crown the way some men consider how to move themselves into a larger house by the sea. A King has to have a Queen. A Baron has to have a Baroness. So it was that I consulted the family books, oily and filth-stained as they were, and discovered how my mother managed to marry a sack of onions and pig snouts.

In our backward, beer-addled family, a wife is gotten by contest, not courting. There is a belt of gold and jasper, handed down grandmother to granddaughter, and the next lady of the house must fit the belt, or else she cannot sleep in a tower and ignore her husband for twenty years. Yellow-eyed superstition and idiocy will always outlive the family that perpetrates it.

I took the belt from my mother's waist. She said nothing. She never did.

But when I sent out my summons for likely young women to come and try the belt to their hips, my mother closed herself up in her tower and would not come out, no matter how many sweet-cheeked maids begged her to unbolt the door. From within, she said nothing.

The whole procedure took weeks. They came waltzing up to my door in every conceivable color and manner of dress: rags and bustles, blond and black, velvet and muslin and plain cotton sashed with rope. I slung the gold and jasper around dozens of waists; I fastened it under dozens of blushing cheeks. It slipped off their hips and cinched them till they could not breathe—no one fit the belt; no licit woman lived in all my countryside.

I did what logic dictated. I went up the long, winding stair to my mother's tower, fingering the belt in my hand, watching the dim light glitter on its dull gems. Faced with the thick oak door and its bronze fittings, I knocked as politely as a suitor.

"Mother," I said. "The belt fits no one."

There was no sound from the room.

"Mother," I said, "I must marry."

There was no sound from the room.

"Mother," I said, "the belt fits *you*."

Oh, don't be so shocked. Morality makes way for Kings, and the dirt-virtue of cattle farmers is of no interest to me.

There was a shuffling and rustling behind the door. Finally I was finished with her nonsense, her childish tantrums, her hiding like a crab in its scarlet shell. I put my shoulder to the hinges—I was never a weak man, and the bronze bent after only two blows. They bent, creaked, and gave, and my mother was sitting on a bed in the middle of a room filthy with dust, sheets tangled around her, her violet-black dress torn and too small, her red hair matted and tangled, spilling onto the sagging mattress.

On her lap was the hole.

The edges of it crackled and warped in a way I had never seen, a strange silver light that actually rimmed the outline of a long-haired girl, slumped into my mother's lap. There was nothing there, as though the girl had been ripped out of the air and left but a suggestion of what she might have looked like, what her posture might have been. All I had seen of the hole until that morning was its absence; this thing had weight and heft, weight and heft and light. There was nothing there, but the nothing glinted dully while my mother stroked its shape.

"I made it," she said, and her voice creaked and groaned, a stuck door pried open. "When he took her, I made it. It was the last magic I ever did."

"Magic," I snorted.

"I set it to walk the house as she would have done, to eat and sleep and laugh as she would have done. But as she might have done, it kept coming here, and only came down the staircase to see you grow, and watch you play and frown and sleep."

"It's nothing, Mother. It's less than air."

She shrugged miserably. "It's not her, I know that, I'm not mad, but when I sleep, it puts its airy arms around me, and I can almost smell her skin. I miss her. I just miss her. But after you killed your father, I let it stay here."

I shrugged. "I wanted to be Baron. I won't apologize for it. Father had let this house go to ruin, and you with it. You only married him for the sake of a gold belt, anyway."

She glared at me through her ruined curls. "You'll believe what you want to believe, Ismail. Belts, collars—they only give you a reason to take the woman you wanted all along, without giving her space to speak."

I looked at the damp-warped floor. Not out of shame, mind you, but because I thought that was what a good son in this situation might do. "The belt fits no one else."

My mother rested her hand on the hip of the hole, and her face seemed to sag, as if some final thing slid out of it, leaving nothing but a dry shell, a sea snail rolling in the sand. "If you cannot think of a reason not to come breaking down my door proposing a thing which not even a King would dare—"

"Would it be better if I was King, Mother?" I exploded, pushing through the hole onto the bed and grabbing her violet-wrapped shoulders—she was so thin! "If I were King, would you curtsey and put on your ermine and dance at our wedding? You know the family law. Better wedded to me than to this disgusting display of magic tricks, cloistered with it day in and day out! I won't apologize for my father and I won't apologize for you. Nothing is gotten in this world except by force—a lifetime in this dead place, where *nothing* ever happens because the only people who live here are *dead,* has taught me that!"

She started laughing, hysterical, unhinged as the door to her room. "Yes, yes, if you were King it would be licit; Kings do whatever they please, Kings and their Wizards—no laws for them! They take and take and what does it matter? No one asks the taken; they just forget, they just forget, they disappear and everyone forgets." She looked up at me, her eyes suddenly canny as a fox in sight of a mouse. "I'll play this game if you want to play it, Ismail mine, but you have to perform a deed of honor. That's what young men do when they're courting, if I remember."

I let her go gently. Was that all? Bring her roses or a dragon scale from furthest isles and she'd put up no fight? "What would you have me do? Let us get this over with as quickly as possible."

"Bring me the head and the collar, and whatever other pieces you want to keep, of the Wizard who took your sister."

Well, killing is easy work. I rose from the bed, and the hole coalesced again where I had been. I bowed to her in as courtly a manner as I have ever managed.

"Lady Iolanthe, I am at your service."

I did not particularly want to marry my mother, you understand. If another girl had fit the belt I would have had her just as easily. But protocol must be observed when one is of a certain station, and it wouldn't be so awful, after all, for her to stand at ceremonies and dance at balls. It's not as if she had ever shared a bed with her last husband, beyond what was necessary for inheritance. I was not happy to go off and kill a Wizard who had done no harm to me, besides being part of an unsavory profession, just so I could make Iolanthe a Baroness twice over, but then, what is happiness? I'm sure I've never met the beast.

It is not that we didn't know where the Wizard who took my sister from us lived—there was not a farm-haggarded soul in the countryside who did not know where Omir rested his staff and vial. But one does not go demanding one's daughter back from such a man, especially when he is bound to such a King as we were ruled by in those days.

That King's Palace was surrounded by deep woods whose trunks were bunched and cracked as old women's spines. The thing itself was close-bordered by two strange-watered rivers, one black and one white. As I crossed the bridges I looked into the current—the black one reflected my face like the side of a dead volcano, glittering in flat shapes between ripples, showing a reasonably handsome young man who was not a Prince, but might be mistaken for one on a particularly sunny day.

The white river showed nothing, sheer and dull as milk.

Not knowing much about how to assassinate when it is not a simple matter of a bedroom and a knife, I applied for an audience and, predictably, was told to wait. I busied myself as best I could, and enjoyed a new kind of life: sleeping in proper rooms for once, eating at proper tables, dressing in proper clothes.

I walked out to look at the rivers every day.

Finally, I was called into the high-ceilinged audience chamber, heralded as Ismail of Barony Baqarah—how strange it was to hear my name intoned by a bored scribe!—and stood before the King and his favorite slave. The King was

at his midday meal, slavering at hay in a golden trough, shoving his face full of grass with both hands.

Monstrous. Unnatural. For men to be ruled by an animal. I suppressed the urge to vomit onto the silver-tiled floor.

Sorrel, the Centaur-King of the Eight Kingdoms, looked up at me, his forelegs buckled and kneeling so that he could eat his fill. His chestnut tail flicked at the air. Hay still stuck to his brown beard. "Oh," he grunted, "it's you." Behind him, the Wizard, in ill-fitting blue-brown robes and a heavy iron collar that weighed on him like a penance, looked from the horseman to me with an uncertain gaze.

"It is him, isn't it, Omir?" the Centaur said, lifting his huge equine form with some difficulty from the trough and clacking his hooves on the tile, keeping his right side always to me, his left in shadow. His brown pelt flowed into pale skin that seemed to rarely see sun and he wore, as you might expect, nothing. There was no throne—how could there be?—but he rested on a pile of rose-colored cushions on a dais, and I suppose for a horse that is as good as a throne.

"Yes, my lord, I believe it is."

"I'm sorry; who am I meant to be?" I asked, nonplussed. Killing is meant to be in the dark, in the quiet, and there I was in a room that could not be brighter if its foundation had been sunk in the sun itself, and what's worse, expected.

Sorrel scratched himself at the forelock with an expression of boredom on his moon-broad face. "Omir told me you were coming, the man who would replace me…"



Before my grandfather went out to pasture, it was decided by those much wiser than I that the Eight Kingdoms, as varied in their folk as a field of ten thousand blades of grass, could not be governed by men and women. They were fit for country gentry, certainly, counting things up and doling things out, but how could they be trusted to speak and act for us, the second nation, the nation of monsters?

Obviously, they could not.

Centaurs seemed a likely choice, standing as we do between the bed and the stable, between men and beasts, between the wild and the world. It was thought providential that our massive hearts, necessary to serve such massive bodies, had eight chambers, one for each Kingdom. And so it was that for many lifetimes, Centaurs ruled—some badly as untrained stallions, some well as sweet-natured geldings. That is the way with rulers; we were never immune. But watching the Kings of men before us, we learned that passing the crown to sons and daughters was as foolish as feeding seaweed to a wolf. We decided our rulers in a way more suited to our strengths: with a race.

The morning was crisp and apple-strewn the autumn that I took my place at the starting line. My rival was Dapple, a tall, handsome gray whose chest was so broad I could not have put my arms around it if they could stretch to twice their usual length. I was a little worried—fast as I was, I was not the strongest of my herd, and my chest looked sickly next to this muscled block of breath and bone.

“It is a perfect day for a race,” Dapple boomed approvingly, pawing the earth with pearl-bright hooves. “I hope you mean to make a real contest of it; I should not like to be Queen just because you had caught a sniffle.” She beamed at me, a winning smile framed by heaps of silver hair. Despite our position, I liked her. She smelled good, like birch leaves and alfalfa and quick-running streams.

The rules were these: Those who had the wish to rule would present themselves at the starting line—and few enough did this, as Centaurs are a reticent folk who generally keep to themselves and scoff at the trappings of power, another reason we were deemed suitable for it—and each of them fastened to a plow. Another plow would be set beside them, and whatever local magician or soothsayer had been chosen for it would enchant the blade to draw itself. The horse who could beat the undrawn plow and the competing beasts would take the crown: Those who could best furrow the earth and make it flourish were those who should help its people to flourish as well.

There were only two of us the autumn morning when I stood beside Dapple and tried my legs at a reign. Each time a race was held, fewer of us turned up at the starting line. In the end, Centaurs prefer the pasture and play and mounting and rolling in grass. But I was not reticent, nor did I scoff at power. I was not the wisest horse ever to whistle through the wind, but I was hungry—in those days, I was so hungry. The crown seemed to sing and whisper and wheedle from its height, slung onto the branch of a tree at the far end of the field. It shone, and sparkled, and sighed that it wished only to rest on my head. I liked it, too; it smelled only of itself, and that was good enough for me.

My thoughts were interrupted as the crowd began to murmur and stamp its hooves in confusion. The trial’s Wizard had come into the field with his plow sparkling like a young colt’s eyes in the sun, long red robes flashing and flapping in the brisk morning.

He had no collar.

He was ageless and high-nosed, clearly schooled with chairs and pencils, well clothed and well shod—but there was no collar. We did not know how to look at him, how to address him, how he fit with us.

He took all of our glances in his stride and set to rubbing his gleaming plow with powders and oils, murmuring to it like a favorite dog, brushing it with his

long, thick-knuckled fingers. When he was finished it did not gleam, but dripped and clouded with baleful colors, ochre and oxblood and onyx. He invited me from my starting position to check his work, as if it were a particularly complex arithmetic problem. I trotted over, meaning to sniff as quickly as I could at the noxious fluids and declare it well done. I was still a simple horse—what did I know about magic, besides how bad it smelled?

But once I was bent over the plow, swishing my tail at flies and scratching the back of my head in what I imagined was a very knowledgeable manner, he turned his pinched face and dark eyes up to me through the share and the shin and whispered, so quietly I thought it was a bee buzzing in my ear, so quietly that he could be sure no one heard him but me.

"I can give you what you want."

"What?" I said, too loudly. Dapple looked over at me through a crowd of impertinent young colts who were trying to measure her height and breadth. Her bared chest was smooth and puffed as she pranced, her proud breasts sheened in gray. She snorted and raised a silvery eyebrow. I coughed theatrically and grinned at her through my sniffle—she laughed, and her laugh was as big and broad as her chest, a laugh fit to burst barrels.

"I can give you what you want: this race, the crown," came the voice again, softer than flies in a yearling's tail. "You're fast enough to beat the plow—that's certain as rain in winter. But you'll never beat her. Look at those shoulders, like spotted boulders they are! She's a better horse than you, a better runner; she'd probably make a better monarch. But she won't give me what I want; I can see that in her withers, her hooves, the fall of her hair, the set of her jaw. She's one of the ones who think virtue can sit easily on a throne. But you, you know how the world really rides, I can tell."

"What is it you want?" This time I was soft as mice in the brush, staring studiously at the workmanship of the plow.

"Why, you, my dear Sorrel! You are precious among creatures, you must know that." He pretended to tighten the joints and brushed a sweaty lock of hair from his face.

"I wasn't particularly aware, no," I answered.

"You are halfway between man and animal—that makes you ideally suited to my interests. Let me pursue my art in peace and without interference. Assist

me in the smallest ways from time to time and I will win this race for you."

I thought as quickly as a rabbit with a fox after him. "You have no collar."

He clenched his jaw. "No. I was freed from it by good fortune; I have reveled in its lack. Slavery is a sin."

I thought as quickly as I am able. It was a good bargain, but if I knew anything I knew that it would end up being more than he claimed. I wiped the sweat from my hands on my coat. "If I am King, and I have a Wizard in my employ, it would only be correct that he be bound to me, that he be my doulios. Otherwise, how am I to trust him? What is to keep him from cutting me to pieces on the smallest whim? Virtue does not sit easily on the throne, you say? Well, then, sin may have a comfortable rest there."

The Wizard grimaced, and I could see his teeth grind beneath leather-thick skin. He looked up to the sky imploringly, and down at his hands, which opened and closed as though his palms were pricked by the tip of a brand. For a moment, I thought the man would actually weep. But he did not. His shoulders shuddered under his crimson robes, which seemed suddenly less bright and cheerful. He put his fingers, almost absentmindedly, to his neck, stroking the pale, clammy skin.

"Yes," he rasped, "fine. Yes. I will put the collar on again if you will give yourself to me. It will be worth it, to have you. We will give ourselves to each other."

I tapped the dirt with my hoof. "What… what will you do to her? It will not be too terrible, will it?"

In less time than a mayfly takes to flap its wings, the sorrow was gone from his eyes, replaced by an uncut stallion's ravenous glee. "Not too terrible, no. I will burst her heart in her chest, one chamber at a time."

I looked at Dapple, how beautiful she was in the autumn light, savoring a lump of sugar in her ruddy mouth. Her long hair sparkled like a fall of spring rain, and her belly was furred in the softest white. I did like her, I did like her so. But the crown shone ahead of her, and it sang, how it sang!

"No." I swallowed dryly. I could hardly speak. "Not too terrible."

Dapple nosed me playfully when I returned to the garlanded starting position.

“I promise,” she said teasingly, her smooth, race-naked skin shining like armor, “I’ll let you stay on as my consort. I’m sweeter than apples and sugar and acorns after rain, I’ll promise that, too.”

I managed a good impression of the grin that such bravado requires, and slapped her rump as comrades will. My fingers were smeared with foul-smelling gray unguent that the Wizard had given me. It would not show against her skin, he said, and no one would be wiser. She blushed with pleasure—and a blush beneath silver skin is something to see.

The bone-horns blared and we were off, running, faster than any rider and horse, and the driverless plow bouncing along beside us, drawing a long, even furrow in the rich soil, its dusts and oils falling off in orange clumps as it went.

For a few seconds, I thought I might win on my own—I am very fast, fastest of all my chestnut-hided family, and sometimes the slender horse will beat the behemoth. My legs clattered quick on the pebbles, but Dapple was only holding back. She spurred ahead with a laugh that shook the elms and firs alike, and slapped my rump with friendly delight as she passed me by completely.

My own heart surged in my chest, as if sympathetic to hers—would he keep his word? She was so far ahead now I could only keep her gray-white tail in view. And then she stumbled.

I felt it in my own chest, a tiny echo of what must have been a cloud-clapping clamor in hers. One by one I felt them go, each chamber collapsing like a hand suddenly clenched into a fist. One, two, three, four. Five, six. Seven. Eight. Dapple tumbled onto the raceway with a terrible dull sound, and pebbles sprayed up all around her like a wave.

I sped ahead. The plow was a full horse-length behind me. I did not look at her as I passed her body, already surrounded by the concerned, soon to be mourners. I crossed the line. The crown sang so loudly, so loudly, and with both hands I seized it, and its voice was pure as sugar, and apples, and acorns after rain.

When we burned her, as Centaurs do their dead, I gave a long and heart-felt eulogy—I was the King, it was my duty to mourn the fallen. The air was filled

with the smell of her meat, and I tried not to gag. The Wizard, Omir, came to me after her ashes were combed and looked over the charred bones.

"You will be the last Centaur-King. I thought I should mention it. Perhaps if you were not the kind of beast to whom a crown sings there would be more after you—it never sang to Dapple, after all. But then, if it had, I would not have chosen you, and your sad place as last in a long line is why it had to be you—you will help me, and you will conquer peoples who will help me. After you, the Kings will be men again, and I know already what they are made of. When you are not past middle age, a young and hungry man will come to you on an unspeakable errand, and he will put a knife into the eight chambers of your heart, and he will be King after you."

Slowly, fat drops of rain began to fall from the sky, extinguishing the last of Dapple's embers.

"Shall we go in?" said the Wizard, a wide smile on his face.



The Centaur-King was lost in himself. "I meant to be a good King," he mused, "I did mean to. But there were revolts to put down and taxes to collect and threats to quell on the borders, and it just becomes too much to carry all that on your back along with virtue. Virtue rides heavy in the saddle, you know."

He rose from his pile of cushions and for the first time I saw him whole, saw his left flank, which had been swallowed up in shadow and rose-colored silk. It was a map of scars, of scars and missing flesh, the cuts, old and new and every age between, crisscrossing his haunches until there was no hide left, only knotted flesh, and long pieces of him were missing, just gone, scooped from him as cleanly as cream from a bowl. Not one of his ribs had been left unbroken. One hoof was as fragile and as filled with holes as a honeycomb, the ankle a mass of scabbed-over wounds. He favored it, and his gait had a terrible lope. He hobbled to me and bent his face to mine, lanky brown hair smoothed back from a haggard brow.

"Tell me—Ismail, is it?—how does virtue ride with your errand in his bags?"

"Lighter," I whispered, "than with an unnatural creature who lets a slave cut into him until he cannot walk."

He looked down as if he had not noticed his ruined side until now. "Oh, yes. This is my use. I don't suppose you have this sort of use—you notice he takes flesh only from the horse half of me, or if I am lucky, the place where horse and man meet. I am happy you came, now that it's happened. Heirs are heirs,

after all. I'm sure you two will find some use for each other, and frankly, I am tired of being useful."

I glanced at Omir. He met my stare, stone to steel, unabashed and unashamed. In that moment, we understood each other, and all thought of my mother evaporated from my mind like steam rising from a snow-rimmed lake. She could rot in her tower with her thrice-damned hole. I did not need her; I needed him.

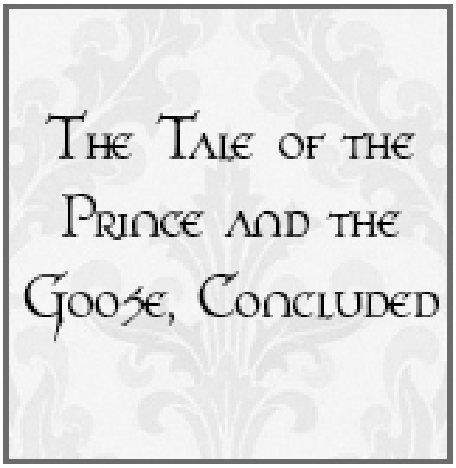
Omir reached into his dark robes and pulled out a long knife. The three of us watched it glint in the light that streamed through fine-cut windows. He handed it to me. I did not know killing could be like this—in the open, in the light, acquiesced to by all. It was almost like being at a church service, and I was as excited as a child at his first altar.

The thrill of it sang to me like a crown.

I took the knife from him and walked to the Centaur-King, patting his shoulders like a rider approaching a nervous mount. He did not shy away, but met my stare, heartwood to iron.

"Monster," I hissed, and slid the knife into his heart, up to the hilt, drew it back and thrust it in again. One, two, three, four. Five, six. Seven. Eight.

Sorrel smiled, and fell onto the dais with the empty thud of heavy bones against marble.



Leander stared at his father in his huge, empty bed, the gray at his temples, the lines in his face that were certainly not born from laughter. His eyes flickered in the low light. "Omir and I did find some use for each other. He did not take off his collar, and I did not have him burnt. He wanted the horse-people and their Witch; I wanted a Wizard to make the rain fall when I pleased, to make the drought come when I pleased, to poison whom I pleased and destroy what I pleased. We did great things; we conquered his horse-people together, who were certainly as unnatural as Centaurs. I have never liked magic, but I tolerated his, and that bought him for me. That is a fair bargain, since neither of us was interested in his cutting into me like a side of beef—as fair as the one I struck with this country, which has bent to my order as well as any country may. I did not set out to be beloved and just, only strong."

"A King can be better than that," the Prince insisted.

"And so we all begin, determined to better our fathers' performances, knowing we can change the very nature of humanity, make it better, cleaner. But then daggers strike in the night, and peasants revolt, and all manner of atrocities become as necessary as breakfast. Only Princes believe in the greater good. Kings know there is only the Reign, and all things may be committed in its holy name. Now, are you going to cut my throat, or would you prefer the more intimate method—strangulation? I may have a garrote in the drawer."

"No," Leander answered him. "I won't kill you like a thief in the night."

Again the King laughed, low and friendly, as though he were reading his boy a story by firelight. "No, Leander. Thieves are not so bad, and killing wears all possible costumes. There is no death, no murder that is better than any other. If you can kill me, the manner hardly bears consideration. You want to kill your own father, and you think it will make your sleep easier for the next seventy years if you can say you did it honorably. But your honor is blackened by patricide, and no amount of high-sounding formalities will make it white again. Are you waiting for a confession, so that your soul will be clean? Very well. Everything she told you is true, and probably a great deal else besides. I have more blood on my hands than you could spill in a lifetime. I wear it proudly. It is my crown and my scepter. Would that you had such purpose, such drive. But you will learn, as we all do." With this he folded back the rose-colored bedsheets with a genteel hand. Beneath them, he was fully clothed in a beaten leather corselet and breeches, brown from top to bottom, like a chestnut horse.

"Do you need a weapon? Did you really come so unprepared? A father's work is never done. At least there is no shortage here." He pulled a dagger from under the mattress—firelight leapt along the blade like a flashing salmon. Leander took it numbly, hardly seeing the hilt slide into his hand. Nothing, he thought, nothing since he had left the Palace that night so long ago, had happened the way it was supposed to.

He sat close to his father, so close he could smell his dry skin, like burned sand. "I'm… I'm sorry."

Ismail of the Eight Kingdoms rolled his eyes and pulled his own dagger from his corselet, holding it to the Prince's skin. "If you can't manage one paltry death, how can you be King? This is how it's *done,* my son."

Before he could plunge the blade into Leander's throat, Aerie, forgotten by the close-caught pair, threw her head back, black hair tumbling to the floor. She screamed again, louder than when she had first emerged, shattering every window and glass bauble, causing the birds to begin to fall from the sky. Crow, sparrow, finch—one by one they fell by the window, like many-colored rain. The cry was filled with rage that swelled like a flooded river as she watched this father-who-was-not-father coming, at last, near to killing the Prince. As

his dagger touched the boy's neck, her voice shattered its blade, and one of the shards penetrated deep into the King's royal eye.

Leander hesitated only a second, and then plunged his knife into the King's chest with all his strength, collapsing onto the hilt as it struck true and deep.

But the laughter of the King did not stop, even as blood bubbled from his mouth.

"Remember, my son," he gasped as he perished, "with my death I instruct you. This is what it means to wield power. In the end, the blade is always in your own hands."

Aerie stood in a shimmering white gown on the Castle balcony. She stared out into the highlands, and the mountains beyond.

"All I ever wanted was to leave this place," Leander said, walking up behind her and placing a hand on her shoulder. "To be free. And he caught the last of us after all, locked me into this place forever. I have been set to zero, for all time."

"But the nest survives, little brother," she replied, her voice growing more musical every day. He held her close.

"At least you are here with me, Aerie. At least there is that."

But she untangled herself from him, and looked sadly into his tired eyes.

"No." She sighed. "I am leaving. I must go. There is a duty on me, just as on you. You have saved your father's kingdom. I must tend to our mother's." Her gaze stole again to the far hills like a line of shadows hunting her. "When I flew, I knew what I was; I knew the wings were… borrowed, but it was far away. I do not know why I kept my mind in the bird's body—it is not what the spell was meant to do. But the wind and the moon were all I loved, and then my mother. There was no reason behind it; I simply loved her. Now there is a glut of reasons, and the endpoint of them all is that there is a cave somewhere in those hills, and I am the only one left to enter it. You were born for power—they'll call you the Maimed King, who lost his blessing fingers. There will be stories, and eventually legends. You cannot escape it, any more than I can escape the memory of the currents of air under my belly. Perhaps you can learn to use it differently; perhaps you can remain a Prince, though you are

called King by all who have voices to utter it. Perhaps not. But I cannot stay to be your teacher. I have lost all that I was. I must find it again, with the poor, lost Stars. We must each find our ways to power, and how to hold it in our hands. Your nest cannot be mine."

Leander struggled with tears he would not let fall on his sister's slender shoulder. "But you will not go for a while, will you?" he said, choking. "I could not bear it. This is such a lonely place. Given time I could learn to hold power like a coal, and not be burned. But you must stay awhile yet, for me. We must be a family, for a while. Just a little while."

Aerie turned to him and smiled dazzlingly, like a dozen noontime suns. "Of course I will stay with you, my only brother, my own."



In the morning, she had disappeared as though she had never been, and the King stood alone in his great ivory hall.

Into the Dawn

The dawn had begun to dress herself in blue and gold, adorning her hair with red jewels. She stretched out her hands to the two children, now almost asleep in the window of the tower. The girl cradled the boy in her lap, her hands stroking his hair, as she spoke the last words of her tale. A wind stirred in the Garden, and a whirl of white blossoms leapt into the air, swept along in the cool currents and eddies. Wild birds pinwheeled above their heads, singing with such passion they nearly died of the song.

The boy looked up at the girl, her face crowned in the new sun, which blazed around her like a corona of liquid gold. Her darkened eyes shone warmly, like polished river stones.

"That was a wonderful story!" he cried, embracing the girl in his excitement.

As she slipped down the ivy and crumbling stones, she smiled secretively up into his beaming face, which was washed by the sun's tender hands.

"And I shall tell you another even more strange and wonderful tomorrow, if you will return to the Garden in the night, and to me…"

Laughing, the girl jumped onto the grass and ran from the tower. She disappeared into the trees, her hair streaming behind her like a promise.


The Book
of the
Sea

In the Palace

"But *Father*!" Dinarzad cried, her voice breaking like a green branch. Her violet eyes flashed indignantly, and there was a high flush in her fair cheeks. "He was with the demon! I saw them!"

"And I believe you, daughter." The Sultan chuckled, shaking the beard that curled down to his chest like a fall of blackberry brambles. "You really mustn't get so worked up about the children under your care. Children, especially young boys of your brother's station, must be allowed some small indiscretions. It is good for my digestion to see them rebel a little. It keeps them from rebelling a lot."

Dinarzad frowned, planting her hands on her hips in a fashion he imagined she had often seen on her own nursemaids. "Father. I *hardly* think this is a small thing. He might have brought that awful child's curse upon all of us! I don't understand why you have not banished her once and for all. Couldn't you leave her to rot on some distant hillside?"

"I perceive that you have a cruel heart, my child. It lies within your breast like a smoldering blade, hissing steam at me. So long as she does not enter the Palace, we do not risk her devilment! When you have lived as long as I, you will learn a little more about dealing diplomatically with demons. To banish her to the wilds would bring down the vengeance of whatever creatures gave her birth. Why should she concern us? She does not even approach the silver gates or the corners of the house. And the boy has promised not to see her again. At the snowy summit of all these things, however, is the fact that you

simply cannot go about locking your siblings in towers when they misbehave. It is unseemly and betrays a sad lack of creativity. Find another way, Dinarzad. That is all."

The Sultan dismissed his daughter with a wave of a gold-ringed hand. She blushed deeply red, the shade of harem silk, and walked out of the throne room with a stiff spine, holding her dark head high.

"That girl is a little autocrat. It is a pity she was not a son. She would have made a fine Sultan," the monarch mused, turning to his supper.

Of course Dinarzad was bound to obey her father's word. But as she wove through the halls like a swift loom, she rubbed her shoulders where one of her mothers had beaten her for allowing such treason in their house. She was cruel because it was *necessary*—the Sultan did not take the time to know that the indiscretions of the children were visited on her by the harem. The bruises flared blue and yellow on her skin like wings, and her eyes watered painfully. In her mind, she was already devising a new punishment as she ascended the thin spiral of the tower, and it grew in her like a slim stalk of wheat.

Turning the heavy key in the lock, she entered the high room where she had left her brother. She was entirely prepared to find him gone, the room empty as a dried well. She steeled her stomach for it, hardening her flesh against blows to come.

Instead, the boy lay sleeping in the windowsill, his tousled head resting against the wind-washed stone, eyes darting beneath his lids as though he was deep in dreams as thick as mulled wine. The sun shone through his hair, turning it to embers in an iron grate, to black-rimmed flames. Dinarzad allowed herself a soft smile, pleased at his reluctant obedience. Nevertheless, when she shook him awake, her voice was rough as crocodile hide.

"Get up, you little urchin. You have slept far too long. Today you will work in the kitchen. If you like to roll around in the Garden like a dog, you might as well go beg for scraps. And the Royal Guard is dining at the Palace tonight, so there is plenty for you to do. By the end of this day you will be so exhausted you will not even dream of your little demon friend."

The boy woke quickly—he knew better than to show her grogginess or the sand of his night eyes. He followed her in a sullen humor down from the tower and into the bowels of the Palace. The kitchens were as noisy as a stampede of oxen, oven fires leaping and steam bubbling from copper pots as though some magic brew steeped within them. Cooks and maids moved with great gestures, bellowing at each other with equal fury, their smocks stained with all manner of colored sauces, syrups, and spices. Dinarzad gave him a harsh shove into the room.

"Cook will look after you. You obey her, now. I don't fancy returning to this inferno today. One prefers to see food only when it is pleasantly on the plate. Have a *lovely* day, little brother." With this she disappeared in a flurry of white skirts and dark, flowing hair.

Cook towered over him, a great, hulking cow with cheeks fat as a hound's jowls and a belly that tumbled over the waistline of her apron in a massive heave of flesh. Her eyes were a pale, fishy shade of blue, and her right one had gone a bit rheumy, so that when she looked him over her gaze seemed to slither on his skin like a snail. She appraised him like a general sizing up a soldier.

"Eh," she grunted, her belly shaking with the sound, "soft thing like you isn't fit to cook a scrap of toast, so you'd better get to washing the flagstones. Stay out of the way of my feet and no stealing, hear?" She gestured at a wooden bucket of gray water that stank of lye and hurtled towards a clutch of chefs faster than he would have thought possible, like a hippopotamus after hapless river boats, squalling at one of the helpless maids.

The boy scrubbed until his fingers were raw and wrinkled as paper pulp, but he was secretly filled with delight, hiding it within him like thieves' gold. He would be able to bring the girl such a feast tonight, anything she could possibly want from the vast kitchens. They were preparing a huge banquet for the Royal Guard, who were so rarely barracked within the Palace gates that their entrance caused lavish holidays to spring up like dandelions in the courtly soil. A gargantuan boar had been killed earlier in the day, and it sat on the central table like a mighty lord, glistening with fat. All he had to do was wait until the maids left, scurrying like muskrats, to serve at the banquet hall, and the cooks

went to report the menu to the stewards. Then the great boar would be unguarded.

And indeed, as night drew on the sky like a bodice, lacing it with the last beams of sunlight, the kitchen cleared of all its citizens and he was alone. Cook, by this time, had probably forgotten his existence entirely.

Slicing off a few fat pink hunks of boar flesh with his little dagger, he rearranged the slick green garnish to cover the missing meat, and cast about for further treasures. He smuggled sugared loaves and a rind of cheese into his vest, packing them in with smoked fish and a few of the little dormice soaked in pepper and honey that the Sultan favored. As he made his escape, the boy looked back over the sorry prison his sister had devised, and with a grin, snatched the shining red apple from the boar's mouth. He crept out the door on his quietest feet, stealing past the glittering silver Gate and into the Garden, clutching his prizes to his chest, where his heart beat like a hammer striking an ivory bell.

In the Garden

BUT THE BOY DID NOT FIND HER THAT NIGHT.

He sat on the lip of one of the great marble statues, his feet resting on the stone tail of a dancing mermaid, and ate his cold pork and apple alone. He could not understand why she would break her promise, why she would not appear as she always had, as if by magic, to deliver her stories to him all dressed in silk and silver. As he chewed the honeyed meat in the dark, he looked into the spray of stars and pictured her face to himself, the private face that was revealed when she was deep in her tales, her smoky eyes shut and moving beneath black eyelids. A terrible fear was born in him suddenly—perhaps she did not like him at all, and only wanted to tell her tales so that her curse would be broken, so that whatever strange miracle dwelt in her stained eyes would release her from the Garden. Perhaps he was nothing to her but an ear. He trembled with it, the crawling cold that chewed his bones. She had abandoned him, and what was left was the roiling weight of sorrow and silence, her absence like a statue in the glowering moon.

That night of all nights, he accomplished his deception easily, and drew the bedsheets over his knees as the sky was beginning to flush an icy gold.

On the last night of the full moon, he wandered out into the western wing of the Garden, where a small lake lay glittering in the cool light, filled with gilt-eyed fish. He had not brought food, having not much hope of finding her. He had returned to eating meals with his brothers after the term of his punishment was complete, and food was difficult to smuggle. Dinarzad

redoubled this by eating solemnly at his side each night, ignoring the stares of the other sons. He hated her, her thin fingers peeling back the skin from roasted quail, holding her knife at the angle they had all been taught as though it were an effortless habit, not the result of years of slapped knuckles.

He crouched at the grassy edge of the clear water, scowling into the sparse mist and picking at pebbles underfoot. The boy's mouth had taken on a permanent sicklelike frown, a little moon whose horns were drawn ever downwards to the black earth. He began to skip stones on the placid water, listening to their satisfying *plink-plink-plunks,* when suddenly a gleam of star and shadow on skin caught his eye, and his heart leapt into his throat like a starving fish after a dragonfly.

The girl stood waist-deep in the water, her long charcoal hair clasped into a wet nest at her neck with willow whips, the lake beading on her stomach, her small breasts, her arms, outstretched as though she were trying to catch the moon in her arms like a child. Her eyes were shut; she did not yet see him. And so he watched her unabashedly, unable to move or to call to her, rooted to the mossy soil by the vision of her rising out of the night, pale as the gasp of a star's breath—and the closed eyes, floating black and secretive in her ghostly face. His own breath would not come at all.

The girl opened her eyes slowly—though truly it was as though she closed them, hiding the dark stains of her eyelids with the cold light of her eyes. She looked directly at him, and he flushed deeply, expecting her to be angry, to retreat from him in shame. Instead, she simply stared at him calmly, the moon and the water still pooling on her body, and made no move to cover herself. They stood this way without motion for some time, as the wide-leaved trees whispered to each other overhead. Finally, the girl waded to shore and pulled her ragged shift over her head. He rushed to the mound of thick grass where she sat and, without meaning to, reached out and gripped her by the shoulders.

"Where have you been?" he choked. "I have looked for you for seven nights!"

The girl cocked her head to one side, like a sparrow considering a hand full of seeds.

"You… you said that you would tell me another story… more strange and wonderful than the last… I thought…" He stared down at his hands helplessly.

“I thought you wanted to tell me your stories. I thought you would tell me all of them,” he finished lamely.

“I will tell you another, if you like,” she answered, her voice still and cool.

“What’s wrong? Why have you hidden from me?” the boy cried.

The girl brushed a fluttering strand of hair behind her ear. “I have not hidden, or at least, I have not meant to hide. It is only that you have not found me. The Garden is wide, and I am sorry. Folk have come and gone since last you heard my voice, and I could not be seen.” She looked at him in that strange, birdlike way again, a light sparking deep in her eyes. “Would you like to hear another tale from the folds of my eyes, a tale of ships and saints, of maidens and beasts and a dreaming city?”

The boy bit his lip. He felt that the polite thing to do was to ask how she had fared, if it had been very hard to escape the notice of one or another noble lord, if she had eaten well without him—but he had not heard the promises of her fantastic creatures in so long that they sounded in his belly like the tolling of church bells, like anchors dropping in a soundless sea, and he felt such a desire for them that he could not be polite.

“Tell me the tale, please!” he whispered.

The girl settled herself on the grass, under the perfume of cinnamon trees and stars like hanging gardens, and spoke, her voice once again as wide and soft as the hide of a jungle cat.

“Once, there was a girl named Snow, and she had no one in all the world to love her.”



Now, she had not always been called this. The girl had once lived in the city of Ajanabh, a warm and well-built place which sat fat and rich on the golden silt of a wide river delta, scarlet flags flapping proudly, the streets winding marvelously through its jeweled heart. She was loved and safe in her mother's house, and expected that her life would continue that way forever, with the cinnamon-scented wind on her skin as she slept.

But Ajanabh faltered, as cities will, and the day came when her fisheries were no longer so full, and her merchants no longer so eager to pole the sludge of the river to reach her glittering harbor. Slowly, the people left their whitewashed houses. Slowly, they abandoned their thick-soiled fields, which had once been so lovingly and reliably inundated by the clear green waters.

Snow, unremarkable among so many others who would never again call the warm-winded southlands home, stood with her parents on the deck of a ship as the pearl-domed city retreated in the distance, until it was nothing more than a glowing line against the sea. She stared over the rail of the ship for days, her hair becoming tangled and salted with the wind, though her parents begged her to come below. They were bound for the glacial North, other harbors great and small, where whale meat and seal fat were to make new fortunes for all the lost children of Ajanabh. Bound for the city of Muireann, which lay on the gray waters of its stormy bay like a child against its mother's breast, host to every ship that crossed the diamond-tipped waves.

But the passing had been difficult for her parents, who could not bear the savage cold. Even less were they prepared for life in Muireann, whose winter seemed never to end, and whose people were as frozen and implacable as snow on a flat roof. The endless chill set into their bones, and before her family had passed a year in the salt-wind and the sea, Snow's parents died.

She grew, surely as an ash tree, and lived as near to a beggar as was possible without starving, mending nets with the fishwives when they would let her take some of their work, scurrying through the docks on odd errands, simply to get a beaten coin to buy bread and seal fat to moisten it.

Though she was resourceful, Snow was not a beautiful girl. Her face was plain, unmarked and unremarkable. Her eyes were a watery shade of green, like sickly lakes caught in a lightless winter. Her lips were small and perpetually chapped; her skin was neither the milk-smooth of girls who ate breakfasts of oranges and strawberries on silver plates, nor the hardened brown of dockworkers' daughters. She chewed her nails and picked at the skin on the back of her hands. Though she was as old as any of those girls, the ones who spent their days entertaining suitors in parlors of brocade and soft laughter, folk that passed her on the streets of the village thought her a child. She never grew as tall of leg or as fair of hip as those charmed ones—in fact, no one would have noticed Snow at all, were it not for her hair.

Since the day she buried her mother and father, her hair had gone pale as an old woman's. It flowed down her thin body in all the colors of a storm-whipped wave: slate and silver, ice and cloud, smoke and fog, ash and iron. The process had not hurt—she simply woke up, grave dirt still under her fingernails, and saw in the mirror that the colors of her home, which once glinted like lamplights in her thick curls, had fled. She was as colorless as ocean foam against the shivered planks of wrecked ships.

And so it came to pass that the girl became a fixture among the fishwives who crowded the dock, tying their nets and mending sails, and for her hair they called her Snow. If they did not love her, the Muireanners accepted her presence and found bits of work that would keep her belly quiet, if not satisfied, looking the other way when she slept in the shipwrights' cavernous warehouses, curled into the skeletons of half-built clippers. She sought the

solace of shadows, keeping her head low and moving through her life with no more sorrow than she had already collected to her thin breast.

One evening, as she sat with a round-faced woman, knotting the last of the day's great silver nets with practiced fingers, she looked up from her work to find that the woman had tucked an orange into the yellow folds of her skirts. Snow glanced at her benefactor, whose loose brown hair curled tightly around a face that might have belonged to a well-fed gnome, merrily lumpy and red-cheeked. Her body was solid as a bull walrus, muscles bulging silkily beneath layers of fat. The woman winked at Snow without stopping her quick stitching, fleshy fingers flashing in and out of the flaxen ropes.

"Can't have those pretty teeth falling out, love. Oranges are like rubies up here, loved as gold and twice as rare. But an old friend of mine from the South sends me a crate every winter. And someone like you deserves a ruby or two from time to time."

Snow turned the blazing fruit over in her hands. When she spoke, her voice was soft and hoarse, for she rarely talked at all, and it had grown as creaky as a brass gate from disuse.

"Where I was born, they grew from trees, hundreds of them, like drops of fire. My mother spiced cakes with the peels."

"So you did come from somewhere!" The woman laughed, her thick body rippling like a bear in mid-roar. "You didn't rise up from the waves, fully formed, on an abalone shell? Well, that's a relief. Wouldn't want to think I spent half my shift sitting thigh to thigh with a naiad."

Snow blinked, brushing her high cheeks with lashes pale as snow-crusted sails. "Is that what they say about me, truly?"

"Some, to be sure, love to tell tales. But no one says much about you—you've no prospects at all, and that means you'll be on these docks till you freeze to the boards. Not the sort of life to inspire the gossips to gnash their own pretty teeth."

Snow did not scowl, as another girl might, but simply pulled back the small tendrils of herself which had ever so briefly been extended to a bright-voiced stranger. The woman extended her fat hand, studded with rough iron rings, to the girl's shoulder. "Of course, I don't mean to be cruel, love—I'm not likely to

be crowned Queen of Whalesongs any summer soon, either. There, there. Sigrid's tongue does tend to flap away without asking permission first."

"Don't worry," Snow said abruptly, shrugging off the hand. "I won't cry. What you said is true enough, I know that."

Sigrid gave the gray-haired child a long look, slow and appraising, a jeweler examining a use-blackened sapphire. "We shall see, I suppose. I thought I knew what was true, when I was young and beautiful. I thought I would always be able to run as fast as I pleased, and take such pleasure in simple meals of seal flanks and pelican eggs. Then the world changed, and I was no longer a maid, and I never knew again." Sigrid straightened, plunging her stubby hands back into her nets. "I'll tell you a tale of my youth, if you like. It will pass the time."

Snow nodded, willing to hear anything that would take her mind from the cold stiffening her fingers to stalactites, and the frozen night which would find her huddled and frozen in the belly of a hollow ship.



When I first became a woman and the blood was still high in my cheeks, red and quick, I longed to leave the frozen waste of my family's lands. There was nothing for me there any longer. My brothers and sisters were all grown, gone to Temple or farm, and my mother did not want to look at me, hoping that I, too, would find my way out of her house. But I lingered—there were still things I loved in the snow, and I was a little afraid to go into the world.

One spring, when the lichen was green-fringed and springy, a group of monks came to our village. All strangers are sacred to us, so they were taken in without question. My mother drew the lot to house them, and that was how it came to pass that three brothers ate, and spoke, and slept, under our snow-thatched roof.

At first they kept their deep scarlet hoods over their heads, mumbling thanks and bowing stiffly over their suppers of near-raw fox and leafy lichen. I was intensely curious, as all maids of that age are, and I peered beneath their cowls throughout supper, trying to catch a glimpse of their faces. Finally, the middle brother straightened, threw back his crimson cloak, and fastened his milky yellow eyes onto mine.

"Is this what you wanted to see, little one?" he growled, and indeed he did growl it, for though these monks had the bodies of strong-calved men, their heads were those of great dogs, tongues hanging from their jaws like the clappers of bells. Their fur was thick and deep, falling to their shoulders, rough-cut as the beards of mountain sages. One brother had a bluish-white

pelt, another was black and brown in patches, and the last was a deep red-gold, like the hair of a girl. But the eyes of each were chill and hard, the color of old mosses, gray and gold all at once. I could not help but gasp, but my wonder only made the middle one laugh, a sound like the grinding of boulders.

"We're not werewolves, love, if that's what you're thinking," the red dog chuckled. "*Cynocephaloi,* dog-heads. Entirely different."

"Vegetarian, for one thing," said the white one, gesturing at his plate, where the pink fox meat lay untouched. My mother apologized profusely, deathly afraid that she had polluted them—some number of my sisters had entered the priesthood, and Mother was ever sensitive to religious niceties. The middle one, clearly a pack leader of sorts, looked up with his liquid eyes and reassured her.

"No, no, meat does not offend us; we simply choose to eschew it. It appeals to the higher nature of the self to put aside food which once lived—I do not consider myself food, why should I ask all other creatures to consider themselves so? Our Order is, however, rather strict. We certainly do not ask our hosts to know our Scripture—certainly not when we have been so rude as to eat without sharing ourselves. But we, too, are wary of violating spiritual… etiquette. This is a land of many faiths. Some do not permit the Sacred Guest to speak of himself, or at all. Others do not allow names to be uttered before the meal is finished. As we have quite finished all that we are permitted to eat, I will begin. I am Bartholomew, and these are my brothers. Balthazar," he said, indicating the blue-white Cynocephalus, "and Bagdemagus," indicating the red. Turning to me, he added in a mischievous tone: "But you may call him ?Bags.' We all do. We belong to the Order of the Scarlet Hood—for beneath the Hood we are one." At this all three made a delicate motion with their hands and whispered some sort of prayer.

Balthazar took up the thread of their introduction then, rasping through his long teeth. "We are traveling home, to Al-a-Nur, City of Light, and the Chrysanthemum Tower. We were a delegation, sent to mediate a great quarrel in our faith, and now that our part is done, we are permitted to return to the Tower which gave us birth."

I must have seemed such a child to them, sitting plate-eyed and loose-mouthed at their feet, savoring the foreign tang of the word on my tongue like

a spiced cake: *Al-a-Nur*. My mother eyed me with suspicion, but I ignored her. I begged to be told of this city, which in my heart I already knew must be the holiest city ever to sit on the earth.

"Truly, girl, you have never heard of the City of Twelve Towers?" Bartholomew stroked his fur as though it were a beard and peered at me. "Seat of the Papess, She Who Was Born in the Purple, the Anointed City which shines like a summer star?"

"Never!" I cried breathlessly.

"Very well," he chuckled, straightening his back like a teacher about to give lessons, "your kind mother permitting, I shall tell you of the Dreaming City, enclosed in her seraphic spheres…"



LISTEN, CHILD, AND I WILL TELL YOU OF AL-A-NUR, seat of the Twelve Towers, the Anointed City. She was founded a thousand years ago, in the year Seven Hundred and Fifty-three of the Second Caliphate. The foundations of the Towers were poured in agate and porphyry, the tapered windows were chiseled into graceful arches. Clear green ponds were dug from the loamy soil, tamarinds and palms were planted, willows and pale-barked birch. Aqueducts ran with sweet water, gurgling up through fountains of silver and glass. Roads were arranged in con centric circles, according to the *Lo Shen* board, our sacred Game, named for the river goddess who laid her waters around the blessed City. The roads were paved in lapis and turquoise, stones which were plentiful in the surrounding mountains—even today the cobbled walkways keep their deep blue sheen.

Markets sprang to life like mushrooms after a rain, filling the closes and keeps with the scent of saffron and broiling meat; traders came to sell dolls and cabinets, sleek red horses and love charms—but they stayed to contemplate the divinity that resides in the exchange of gold in the marvelous Towers which comprised the many hearts of the City.

The Towers were themselves arrayed in the pattern of the *Chang-O* configuration—the ideal defensive deployment of the *Lo Shen* pieces. On the outer rim rose up the Tower of Sun-and-Moon, whose roof was tipped with a great diamond and a great topaz, melted into one another in an unimaginable furnace. Now one stone, it refracts the light of the heavens onto the City in a

shower of prisms. There is the Tower of Patricides, bright with blood trickling between its polished stones, a thin, steady flow which pools in a glowering crimson moat at its base; and the Tower of Ice and Iron, its twisted metallic spire bruising the clouds. On the second ring lay the Coral Tower, its deep rose pocked and rippled with anemones kept moist by loving novices; the Tower of Hermaphrodites, hung with veils and inscribed with sacred ideographs, silver ink on a golden wall; the Chrysanthemum Tower, the living stone ablaze with sixteen-pointed flowers flashing gold and scarlet at the noonday sun; and the Tower of St. Sigrid, bristling with ships' prows and wheels and masts. In the innermost circle were built the Nightingale Tower, through whose walls the wind whistled, singing as sweetly as that tiny brown bird; and the Tower of the Nine Yarrow Stalks, whose very surface was a divinatory device, painted in a thousand shades; the pattern of sun and shadow on the colors is still interpreted daily within those walls. There also were the Towers of the Living and the Dead, which once stood straight and tall, the one walled in hawk and falcon feathers with tufts of fur thatching the roof and doors of serpent-skin, the other riddled black with catacombs and crannies—but over the centuries, they have leaned further and further from their bases, until they almost touch. Now there is a small bridge of silk and ebony between the upper rooms of the Towers, and the initiates move freely between them.

Finally, in the center of Al-a-Nur a slender, simple tower was erected, fashioned from camphor wood and the roots of rose trees, knobbed with silver nail heads glittering like constellations set into the polished walls. Its roof was thatched from willow whips, its windows shaded in soft deer-skin—and this is the Tower of the Papess, the holiest site of this holy City.

For Al-a-Nur is the seat of a dozen faiths, all presided over by the Papess, whose wisdom has guided us from our earliest days. Each Tower is a self-contained spiritual sphere, each with its liturgies and fasts and scriptures. They recognize the divine in myriad ways, but recognition of the Papess ensures peace. The Caliphate, which rules the surrounding countryside, allows Al-a-Nur complete sovereignty; and thus it has gone in prosperous and tranquil fashion across the long years. From every direction come young men and women, seeking to spend their lives in contemplation, and there, under the light of Sun-and-Moon, they find a path that suits them. Al-a-Nur is a

carved box which holds the wisdom of the world, knowledge lost to all but our spindled Towers. It is the paradise of the wishful and the wise.

There have, of course, been interruptions in our peace. When Ghyfran the Forgiving died, the Caliphate elevated an outsider, Ragnhild, First of Her Name, to the Papacy and installed her in Shadukiam, a city to the east, in an attempt to draw the wealth of Al-a-Nur to itself, and transfer the religious authority which has always resided in the Twelve Towers to that apostate city, where, by no great coincidence, the treasury of the Caliph was kept. This false Papess, called the Black, was a great crisis for the Towers, for the process by which a new Papess is chosen is a complex one, requiring the consent of all the sects of the City as well as the Papal Household. Ghyfran had died suddenly, and a successor had not been confirmed.

From the Tower of Hermaphrodites a candidate arose, and while the Black Papess became more and more entrenched in Shadukiam and the minds of the people, Al-a-Nur was as filled with chaos as a winter storm with lightning. All agreed that Presbyter Cveti was highly qualified and beloved, purity of soul echoing in every spoken word and graceful movement. Nevertheless, the appointment could not be agreed upon.

As must be obvious even to you, my child, the adherents within the Tower of the Hermaphrodites reveal themselves to be neither male nor female. There is no shame in this for them; it is simply their nature, and the nature of the cosmos as they conceive it. Though each was born a daughter or a son, they clothe themselves plainly, bind up their hair, and uncover the secret of their sex to no one. For them, the most divine of all things is the merging of opposites—of light and dark, of sacred and profane, of male and female. They believe that they are blessed so long as they maintain a balance, hanging like a human pendulum between two states, uniquely able to experience the world as both man and woman, and as neither. But the Papacy is a matriarchy, has always been thus, and to some, Cveti seemed to be a sacrilege, polluting the Holy Seat. If the Presbyter was male, it was unthinkable that he could claim the seat. If female, she must declare it before all, and preserve the law of the City. The conflagration of this debate engulfed the City in red flames.

Of course Cveti's Tower had never held that highest of offices, and felt that any refusal to accept so illustrious a candidate was a boldfaced insult to their

order. Many, such as the Tower of the Patricides, themselves an all-male sect, and the *Draghi Celesti* of the Tower of Ice and Iron, warrior-priests utterly loyal to the traditions of the City who hide their faces behind identical ivory serpent-masks, would not support any alteration to the laws of succession, partly out of fear that their own internal customs could then be altered. No one would dare set the precedent.

Cveti, who loved Al-a-Nur above all things, feared that in the roiling furor the Papacy would be destroyed in the hands of Ragnhild and the Caliphate before a decision could be made, and withdrew from consideration. Yet no other candidate was so worthy, so capable of battle or meditation with equal ease, or so well beloved among the Towers, as Cveti of the bell-deep voice. All agreed that in that time of crisis, only Cveti could lead them against Shadukiam. It was only the shape of hip and curve of lash which was in question, never the holiness of the Presbyter, nor sincerity of faith. The whole City was at a stalemate, and Ragnhild all the while consolidated her authority, growing fat as an engorged spider in the East.

And so it came to pass that Cveti appeared one morning in the Jade Pavilion, which spread out from the Papal Tower, shimmering green and white under the thin winter clouds. She had removed the ritual clothing of her Tower and donned a dress which closed her waist into a curve and flowed over her legs to trail its dark velvet over the jade floor of the courtyard. Her breasts, which had never seen the sun, rose smooth as new paper from the embroidered bodice. She had loosed the traditional seven knots from her hair and let it fall to her shoulders, straight as virtue. She had pulled rings onto her fingers and scented her skin, painted her lips and pulled silk slippers onto her feet. She needn't have done it—her word as to her sex would have been enough—but all that finery was the extent of her humility, showing us all how far she would go to be what the City asked her to be.

She stood before the Tower as though before the hangman's noose, tears streaming down her proud cheeks—yet her mouth never quivered as she knelt at the feet of the Papal Household and forswore the tenets of her faith, vowing thenceforward to serve only the Papal Tower, and never again to hide her nature; in all things she would serve the greater need of the City, emulating the line of Papesses which had come before her. With stunned tears springing to

their own eyes the Household accepted her pledge, and the Towers, awed and humbled, confirmed Presbyter Cveti as the seventeenth Papess of Al-a-Nur. On the day of her ascension, Cveti went into the cavernous mausoleum beneath the Tower and kissed the coffin of her predecessor with great tenderness. She announced to all in those shadowy rooms that she would take the name of Ghyfran, the dead Papess, for her own.

Ghyfran II led a great army of *Draghi Celesti* in their thousand identical masks against Shadukiam, and sent the tongue and breasts of the Black Papess to the Caliphate in a silver box. While on campaign, it was noted by her generals that Ghyfran always bound her hair in seven knots before riding into battle. The rest of Ragnhild she yielded to the judgment of the Draghi, who left the apostate's body fastened to the earth with golden chains at the precise center-point between Al-a-Nur and Shadukiam.

And for five hundred years, the Caliphate quelled its desire to interfere with the succession of the Holy Seat.



I WAS SLEEPY THEN, RESTING MY HEAD ON THE rough-hewn table and letting Bartholomew's voice roll over me like gentle water over stones. But Al-a-Nur had risen up in me in all its colors, and I could feel a yearning for it turning and warming itself in my belly. All my sib lings had gone, I was ready—why should I not leave this wretched hut, where my mother's eyes scalded my back wherever I walked?

"Take me with you," I whispered, sitting up, my eyes suddenly bright and calculating as a hungry little cat in the snow. "Take me to Al-a-Nur, to the Chrysanthemum Tower and the green pools under the willow. I will become wise there, just like you, you'll see!" I clutched his hand tightly, but seeing his startled expression, let the callused fingers fall back to our table.

Bags—for so I already called him in my heart—peered closely at me, his eyes narrowing to tiny moon-slivers in the red bleed of his fur. He looked to Bartholomew and whispered, *"And the wolf shall lead her astray..."*

"What?" I asked, straining to hear their suddenly hushed voices. But Bartholomew grinned hugely, his ponderous tongue hanging out of his mouth in a most friendly fashion.

"Nothing, my dear," interrupted Balthazar, shaking his ice-colored fur, "just a bit of Scripture. *The Book of Carrion,* chapter twenty-eight, verse ten. If you are to come with us you will learn that and much more. Certainly we will have you—we cannot turn a seeker away by the laws of our Tower. But perhaps it is not solely our decision…?"

My mother's ponderous back was turned to us, and it shook slightly with tears—sorrow or relief I could not tell—smothered as quickly as snow sliding from a pine bough to the frozen earth. I went to her, and put my hands on her shoulders, leaning my head against her warm skin.

"Go," she spat hoarsely. "Just go. If the Stars wish us to meet again, they will fashion the path before your feet." She shrugged me off and disappeared from the great-room with her heavy, lumbering gait. I began to pack food for myself and my new brothers—we would need bread for the journey south.



"You're not bored, are you, love?" Sigrid shifted on her bench, nets knotted over her hands like silver rings. The sun was well past noon, and the sickly light of the northern summer spilled over the windless water below the quay, thin as milk.

"Oh, no," breathed Snow, her colorless lips spreading into something like a smile. "Don't stop! Did you ever see the Twelve Towers? Did you meet the Papess? Was she very beautiful?"

"I don't believe I've ever heard you put so many words together in the same place, girl. If you're not careful, they'll get together and have babies, and then we'll never shut you up."

Snow was stricken for a moment, then tore her eyes from Sigrid as though she had been caught staring through a shop window full of cakes, furiously tying her net with shivering fingers. Sigrid's face became soft in all the places it had been hard. Her cheeks melted into a rough affection.

"Love, I've never been anyone's mother; I don't know how to talk to young or old. But don't stop smiling just because I flap my mouth and say something that's not dressed around the edges like a lace tablecloth. Thicken up and we'll get along fine."

They were quiet together for a while, listening to the creak and rock of the ships in port, the tightening of the wet ropes that tied them to the pier. Gulls cackled in their witch-reedy voices, swooping into the shallows for fat pink fish. Snow's silvery hair was dark with damp, curling against her dress. At last,

Sigrid began to speak again, neither pausing nor slowing in her work as she talked.

"As to the great City, I did go, far to the south, out of the white waste-lands, across a scrub desert where there was no water, and through valleys where wine grapes grew big as plums. The dog-men never seemed to tire, and their red hoods kept out all manner of storm and sun-blisters, where I had only my little shift and a ragged old fur cloak…"





I WAS SOON QUITE FRIENDLY WITH THE BROTHERS—who, as it turned out, were literally brothers as well as fellow monks. They talked often of home, and of the other members of their litter who farmed their fields in peace and thought nothing of theology. Balthazar had the quickest tongue, often completing our sentences, as though he was impatient to hear the ends of them. Bartholomew was the most devout and kind; he shepherded me like a favorite lamb, teaching me from *The Book of the Bough* and *The Book of Carrion* (though never the meaning of the strange proverb uttered at the old home-table), though he welcomed me to choose from any of the Towers once we arrived—the variety of religion laid out before me would be as a table groaning with feast foods, he promised. Bags was our jester—he tickled me and taught me to wrestle, nipping me playfully if I let down my guard. It was not long before they were the only stars in my little sky.

The four of us kept to the roads, wherever they wound, and had food when it was plentiful—grapes and apples and occasionally soft cheese from a passing cart, but never meat, of course. The Cynocephaloi assured me that they were excellent hunters, with strong, lean human legs and jaws that could snap a bird out of the air before the song died in its warbling throat, but they would never do so. It was with terrible sadness that Bags brought me a skinny hare one evening when the desert spread out around us like a fallen dress, embroidered with sagebrush and dusty pebbles. The poor creature had dropped dead of the heat; Bags did not want to waste the meat, and I was famished. I had grown up

devouring fox haunch and seal fat; the desert was unkind to my young limbs. With tears pooling in his yellow eyes, he laid the rabbit in my lap and closed its eyes as though the beast had been his brother.

"Death," he whispered, his throat squeezing out words like blood from a deep wound. "We have seen so much death on this pilgrimage, death common as coats hung up in a hall. Four of us went out from the Chrysanthemum Tower, and four of us return—but not the same four! Do the gods mock us with numbers, tossing them at our hearts like jester's balls? Do you know where we went, where we had gone before we came to your village? What our mission was? Al-a-Nur is the City of Light, yes, oh, yes, and the moon on her dozen towers is like water on my tongue after years of thirst! But she asks so much of us, so much is required to keep that light burning gold and blue!" He put his shaggy head in his hands, his sobs warped by the shape of his snout; the sound of his snorting, snarling grief was terrible to hear. "I can still smell his blood, his blood on my hands!"

I put aside the hare and tried to comfort him—Bags, who was always cheerful and full of jokes my mother would have whipped me for repeating, Bags, who had become my favorite of all the brothers, wept in my arms like an orphaned child. I could see the sullen fireflies of his brothers' eyes gleaming some feet away, but I did not think they would come near. *The Book of the Bough* said: *Grief is a private sacrament. Give it not to others as though it were a gift.* He should not have wept in my lap at all—his brothers would not shame him by witnessing his lapse.

Bags looked up into my eyes and bit his tears into pieces. "Everything that was done was necessary, little sister, so that the City might live. But I have tasted a yielding throat in my jaws, and I cannot tell, I cannot tell: If one sins in order to preserve virtue—is this still sin? I am sorry, girl, you are not one of us, you will not be stained by my sorrow, you cannot be polluted by it. Let me give my grief to you, who are innocent of all these necessities, clean of all darkness. Let me tell you what my brothers and I did in the name of Al-a-Nur, the Anointed City. Let me tell you of the fourth whose place you hold…"



What Bartholomew told you was true, about Ragnhild the Black, who called herself Papess five centuries ago and was slain by Ghyfran the Selfless. We know the tale better than any, for its continuation lay with us, when we set out from the Salmon Gate—the Gate that calls us home from our first steps into the wild, which re minds us of the river that gave us life, and to which we must return when our muzzles have grown bare.

The Caliphate, now the Fourth Caliphate, has always envied our autonomy, and hated the scrap of parchment with the hoofprint of the First Caliph stamped firmly on its cracked surface, assuring our freedom unto the end of days. Our City is rich beyond the dreams of royal bursars, and we are not tithed, we are not conscripted, we are beholden to no earthly law. After the death of Ragnhild, we had hoped that the time of their interference was finished, that their lesson had been etched deeply enough in blood that no children of our children would ever fear another apostasy.

It was etched to the depth, it would seem, of five hundred years, and no more.

After the death of Ghyfran XII—Ghyfran has become a favorite name of the Papess line, though the wolf of my heart mourns the loss, stillborn, of a long line of clear-eyed priestesses called Cveti—our current Blessed Papess, Yashna the Wise, was confirmed with no great controversy and all due ceremony. The Papal Tower gleamed in its deep hues as always, and its silver glittered as it had the day the nails first tasted the wood. There was no issue of succession. She

was of the Tower of the Dead, which has given us many solemn and temperate Papesses. They are suited to it; the dead give nothing so much and so well as perspective. Yet the Caliphate chose this barely noticeable interregnum to interfere a second time, and under the Rose Dome of Shadukiam, the Apostate was born again like a black-mouthed calf.

And worse, she took the name of her predecessor—once more there was a Ragnhild with a diadem on her brow. She had sent men to retrieve the golden manacles that held the first false Papess to the earth between cities, left there as a monument to remind the Caliphate that Al-a-Nur was never again to be superseded by a filthy banking metropolis. It was said that the new Ragnhild wore them day and night, the broken chains hanging delicately from her slender wrists, that ancient gold glowering against her skin. It was said that her hair was precisely that shade of gold, that her eyes were so black that they seemed to have no pupils. It was said that she would not even call herself Ragnhild II, but believed herself to be that murdered Papess reborn, and ever wore the deep violet gown in which those unfortunate bones had finally been interred. Its grave-tatters showed her ghost-pale skin in many places, an indecency no true Papess of the Tower would have allowed.

One late evening last summer, when the blue of the sky was deeper than any sea, my brothers and I were called from the singing blossoms of the Chrysanthemum Tower to an audience with Yashna. We went, I and my three brothers—for Barnabas was the fourth of our number who stood before Yashna and heard her crow-song voice. His fur was perfectly black, without the patches of brown Bartholomew inherited from our strong-hipped mother. He was the strongest of us, and the youngest.

The Papal presence, in simple gray robes and unadorned diadem, soothed the image of the wraith-Papess from our troubled hearts. She is not a young woman, our Mother Yashna; her deep brown skin is folded and creased as a beloved book. When she reached out her hand to touch our bent and reverent heads, her palm was warm and dry as a desert stone after twilight has fallen.

"My sons, listen well to me, for our City is once again besieged. I am not a Ghyfran"—at this she smiled a weary smile that turned up the corners of her mouth like the horns of the moon—"I am not even a Cveti. There is nothing in my body to give to Al-a-Nur. I am a crone; I accept this. I cannot lead an army

against Shadukiam, and even if I could ride at its head, we have been so long at peace that I fear the Draghi are not what they were. They train and pray and know nothing of true war. No, this time we cannot simply crush the Black Papess under the weight of our Towers. It is a time for stealth and for cunning—and these things I can give with both hands. I have chosen you because you will not be suspected; the Scarlet Hoods have ever prohibited violence of any kind, and no one would think to question your tranquil spirits. Nevertheless, I must ask you to break your vows, as immaculate Cveti once did, in service of the lifeblood of the Twelve Towers. I am sending you from the river and familiar waters; I am sending you from the sixteen-pointed chrysanthemum. You must go east, and kill the Black Papess."

Oh, sister, I would like to tell you we were shocked, that we agreed only out of duty—but the truth is that words such as "kill" had little meaning for us who had grown up through the cycles of the opening and closing of flowers, who had never eaten animal flesh or struck another creature in anger. We agreed because it was Yashna who asked it, we agreed because it was Yashna who told us we would be forgiven, because we wanted to wear the holy, secret name of Cveti sewn into our chests, because we wanted to be the saviors of our City, which was the deepest heart of our hearts. We thought nothing of Ragnhild, and nothing of the task. We eagerly swore ourselves, and kissed her withered hand, which smelled so sweetly of sandalwood and rustling scrolls. There was no shadow of guilt in us as we departed, as we heard the soprano echo of the Salmon Gate closing behind us.

It was not so far as we had imagined from Al-a-Nur to Shadukiam—it seems, when you rest in the arms of the Dreaming City, that all things outside her walls belong to another universe, impossible to reach by the mere motion of one foot before the other.

The land between the two cities is pleasant.

How we joked and bounded across those well-tilled fields! How we gorged ourselves on wild strawberries and oranges like little flames flashing in the morning fog! Barnabas especially reveled in the open spaces, cavorting ahead of us on his quick, flat feet. "Come on!" he cried. "There is no reason not to enjoy ourselves along the way, even if the task ahead is dreary and dire. *The Bough* says: *Heed not the dark before, behind, and beside; dwell always in the light of*

the open heart. And the blueberries are so sweet on the road at first light!" Bartholomew was his usual self, staring fretfully at the night stars. Balthazar allowed Barnabas to cheer him, and the two played and wrestled together beside our nightly fires.

How cordially we were received at the sun-dappled wall of Shadukiam! How brightly her diamond turrets glittered against the great wicker dome that arches over the city, alive with a thick latticework of roses trailing over the slick surface, obscenely red dotted with the most delicate of pinks and whites. The guards let us enter without question, and our appointment with the Papess (it was terribly difficult to bite off all our accustomed prefixes, not to call her Black or False or Apostate—but we wrangled our words into a genial array) was arranged smoothly and with great courtesy. Of course, they beamed. The Papess welcomes all her sons and daughters to her bosom, they assured us. She yearns to bring her family together under the Rose Dome and heal the breaches between them, they said. Her only concern is for their souls. They bowed and scraped.

How easy it was to hate her, little sister.

We needed to smuggle no weapons into her vaulted hall; our daggers were borne in plain view, the sharp teeth of our hunter heritage which had known no flesh but that of apples and peaches. It seemed only a moment cavorting through orchards and we were here, ushered into her private antechamber, kneeling before her strange throne, which seemed to be made of the same roses that covered the city dome—yet they were alive, and writhed against her body with lascivious familiarity.

Her face was obscured by her hair as we knelt—she did not greet us or ask us to rise—the long white-gold length of it falling over her cheeks like a nun's veil. On her wrists were the golden manacles, the chains idly brushing her bared knees; the famous violet gown showed much of her pale body, the low rim of her right breast was bare, patches of her hips and belly gleamed balefully from the ancient fabric.

I wonder, sister, if it was easier because she looked so precisely like the ghoul we had been warned of—if she had appeared without those oft-rumored accoutrements, might we have been moved by that beauty, might we have hesitated? But she was the very image of herself, unmistakable and pure.

"Welcome home, O errant sons," she said, her voice deep and cloying as a many-storied honeycomb. She did not lift her head. "The house is ever strengthened when all its children return to its hearth. It warms me to receive you."

"We are honored, Mother." Barnabas spat the honorific at her, the taste of it surely bitter as lime leaves in his mouth. "Yashna has sent us with missives of peace—"

She raised her eyes suddenly, their black lights flaring like sparks from an ancient anvil. "Yashna has sent you to kill me. To rid your pestilential city of an inconvenient woman. If my attendants are fools leaping to the hope that Al-a-Nur will accept us, do not make the mistake of looking for me to leap with them. I am Ragnhild—I have felt the press of Al-a-Nur's hand before."

We exchanged nervous looks—Bartholomew licked his dark jaw. If she was truly mad enough to believe herself the dead Apostate reborn, perhaps death would be a mercy. I tried to sound the depths of her delusion, murmuring, "I know that your predecessor suffered greatly after the war—"

"No, my son. Not she. *I*. I lay on the rocks and the sun gnawed at my flesh. I pleaded for my life with a useless stump of a tongue. I watched your precious Cveti close up my severed breasts in a silver box. And I listened to the soldiers praise her false name—*Ghyfran! Ghyfran!* The whore who betrayed her god for power. This body is new, but I am Ragnhild, first of my name, and I am the plague which will burn through the marrow of the Anointed City. The crowds will turn east to Shadukiam to look upon the faces of the gods; they will bow to the Rose Dome in wonder and awe. The ruins of your corrupt Towers will become a curiosity, where children are brought to tell the tale of that decadent and wasteful clutch of nearsighted monks, and how my purifying vengeance brought them low. I will not even be slowed by your lumpish, deformed bodies crunching under my feet—Yashna is a senile, drooling serving wench, and her lapdogs are nothing to me."

"You must know," Bartholomew said slowly, "that the purifying vengeance is not yours, but the Caliph's. He is using you to take the wealth of our city for his own. Why do you think he has installed you so near the treasuries, the granaries, the little men counting diamonds in darkened rooms? What has Shadukiam ever been but a bank vault, a plate for the Caliph to feed from? If

you are truly Ragnhild, if you have such power, you must know that the blame lies with the Caliphate and their greed—why not loose your hatred upon he who led you like a little calf to the broad-faced butcher? What offense has Al-a-Nur given, save that we have endured in peace and prosperity, that we have worshipped our gods with piety, that we have built beauty into a barren world? Yet the Caliph has used *you* like a painted whore, dressing you up in a corpse's clothes and reaching out with your hand to clutch handfuls of Nurian gold."

"The Caliph is a dog licking himself on a tin chair," she snapped. "The first time, I was a fool, and he whispered in my ear that I could be holy, I could wash my skin in crushed sapphires; he kissed my throat and promised to make me the Queen of Heaven. This time I came to Shadukiam with him crawling before me on a silken leash…"



I WAS THE CALIPH'S LOVER FROM THE AGE OF sixteen—the first time I was Ragnhild, and the first Caliph I loved. I went happily to him—he was dark of eye and leg, and smelled of spices at whose names I could not be gin to guess. He loved that my skin showed bruises so prettily, he loved that my hair was the color of wealth. And one evening, when his war with the Southern Kingdoms had raised a cacophony of metallic death in the desert, he kissed the mole on my calf and asked me if I would like to be a god.

I was a little fool. Anything my Caliph offered me, I took with grateful trembling and adulation. He stroked my lips and said that he required the gold of Al-a-Nur to continue the war, and that their succession was in doubt. He would put a cloak of fur and shining bronze on my shoulders and a diadem on my head. He promised me a city—me, who had spent my childhood learning to breed goats on a wretched patch of scrub-brush! He promised me the diamond turrets of Shadukiam, if I would call myself Papess and take the holiness of the Dreaming City for my own.

I understood nothing of politics, but I cherished every rich meal and soft dress. I was carried on a litter overland to my new home, and my name was sung by a hundred castrati as I entered under the Dome of Roses, the sun filtering pink and flame-red through those petals. What could Al-a-Nur have to compare with the beauty I saw that first day? I was closed into a house grander than a Palace, and took my vows dizzy with sweet, black wine. I made my mark on requisitions to be filled by the Caliph's men at Al-a-Nur, on

conscriptions and taxations—my hands ached every night. I knew nothing of the city whose riches I was allocating, or whether the requests were acknowledged; I simply knew the days of rustling paper and the nights when the Caliph would return from the capital and press his face into my neck.

Until the day I was told that there was another Papess, that she had made some great sacrifice for the Twelve Towers—little did I know that she had damned herself for a hat and a sword. She had called me Apostate, they said. She had called me the Black Papess and led even now a grim-greaved army to my beautiful new home. I wept and begged to be allowed to see my lover, desperate to be hidden away from this avenging demon. I knew nothing of the Papacy, I was only a child scribbling on scraps of paper; what would this beast do to me who was born to it, who fought to possess the title I wore as lightly as a sparkling brooch on a festival day?

But the Caliph had gone—his little gambit had failed. He could not beat back the new Ghyfran's army and continue to hold the desert line. He had abandoned me in my filigreed Palace with only the piles of my ignored proclamations to guard me. I do not now believe he was ever serious about obtaining the Papacy—he was not a serious man. I was a bauble, no more than expendable. If I could hold my chair, so be it; if I lost it, the cost to the throne was less than that of a modest feast.

I cowered in my antechamber, ill with terror, rocking back and forth while my hair fell out in my hands. Every creak of the floor seized my heart in its fist and wrenched cries from my lips. I did not eat; I slept clutching a knife. I fancied that I could hear the ivory trumpets of the Nurian horde each day at dawn, and before my eyes at nightfall was the unchangeable image of their slavering faces—everyone knew that strange beasts lived in the Anointed City, and their grotesqueries floated through my dreams, leaving furrows in my flesh.

When I had been told that the army, the Draghi Celesti—words I could barely pronounce—were encamped but a day's march from the city gates, a boy came to me. He found me quivering behind the dais, and stroked my hair as though I was his lost daughter, yet he was no more than a child, ruddy-faced and ruddy-haired.

"What if I told you," he crooned, "that you could survive this?"

I stared like a wounded fawn at his pink cheeks. “Surely you don’t mean to be my protector, do you? You’re no more than an oversized housecat! The Papess will kill me and bathe in my blood. It’s what they do, you know.” The boy frowned.

“Well, perhaps ?survive’ was hyperbole. But I am not exactly what I appear. Bodies, you see, are as cheap as daffodils in a spring market. This boy died of a fever not more than a week past—and I enjoy being a child. My name is Marsili. I traffic in the dead, in vacant flesh. I cannot technically save you from what the turncoat Papess will commit upon your pretty limbs, but I can keep your spirit safe until the world’s wheel turns again and you might have a chance for vengeance. Or to live a nameless life among goats, if that is your preference. Do I hear a yes or a no?”

His green eyes seemed to wriggle into me like twin serpents seeking out their mother’s cool skin. “You would do this for me?” I gasped.

“Well, not without payment, of course! This is Shadukiam, the counting house festooned with weeds! What cannot be bought here, what cannot be sold for a handful of copper and silver, a palm piled with blue gems, what cannot be had if the having is worth the cost? Every divinity and perversion is hung up with leather straps in our markets like dead geese in winter, the toes of those myriad desires pointing heavenwards, washed in haggling shouts, desperate cries! This place has always been my home; there is nothing I require that it cannot provide—every day a sweet-faced youth dies for the love of a rich girl, or starves, having gambled his few coins on a footrace! And when they have gone, the beautiful bodies are mine to wear like new-pressed shirts. What I ask of you is so small compared to the magic I can perform. There has never been a greater practitioner of the dead arts than I.”

My curiosity wrestled with my fear. “How did you come by this power? Not even the priests of the Dead in Al-a-Nur know such a spell.”

He looked at me strangely, stroking with one slim hand a beard he did not have. And then, he began to speak, as the city burned around us.



When I was born, I was no larger than a farmer's plough-splayed thumb.

My mother was bitterly disappointed—she and my father had waited so long for a son, and yet she had finally given birth to nothing more than a freak. My noble parents sought to sell me to every passing circus—but the elephants stampeded and the lions took sick with palsy whenever they brought my miniature cradle near. Gypsies made the sign of the evil eye and placed small charms on our threshold in the night to ward against devils. Neither Towers nor Temples would take me—what kind of cleric would I make, who could never hope to grip a quill? I could not tillland; I could not sell goods.

My father began to believe that I was not only deformed, but a demon.

Every day they went into the market and offered me to anyone who would spare a coin for my wretched little body. My mother would not nurse me. She fed me on scraps of chewed meat and pauper's gruel. She suggested to passersby that I might be used for snake-training, to spy on relations, or as an exotic fish-bait. As for myself, I was shrunken and misshapen, but my mind was sharp and fiery as blacksmith's tongs, and I could speak perfectly well by the time I was three days old. Before I reached a full week I also spoke the dialect of the gypsies. Before a month there was hardly a word in that market I did not understand. But I held my tongue against the roof of my mouth and let no word escape—if my mother knew, it would only drive up her price, and I wished her no profit.

Finally, when I was twenty weeks of age and had not grown at all, a buyer appeared. He was very tall, and thin as a length of paper. His skin and cloaks were the color of the moon—not the romantic lover's moon, but the true lunar geography I had heard whispered by Sun-and-Moon Nurians come to buy glass for their strange sky-spying tools: gray and pockmarked, full of secret craters, frigid peaks, and blasted expanses. His eyes had no color in them save for a pinpoint pupillike a spindle's wound—the rest was pure, milky white. He passed three solid gold pieces over my mother's palm, and she shuddered in revulsion at his touch when the money changed hands. She handed me over eagerly, examining the coins like a fat pig snuffling at its supper slop. From then on I belonged to the Man Dressed in the Moon, and my mother, no doubt, got a fine dun cow or pair of oxen out of the bargain.

The Man Dressed in the Moon held me gently in his hand as we navigated the market towards his house. His skin was cool and dry; it smelled of leather and gardenias. When we reached his doorstep, I noted that the house was colored exactly as his clothes were: gray and blistered with depressions, as if some celestial grapeshot had been fired at the façade. The door was no more than a blasted hole covered in oilcloth, and there were other smells blowing through it as we passed through, a whisper of ice and withered flesh.

The Man Dressed in the Moon set me upon a smooth tabletop in his study and peered at my tiny eyes.

"Well, young man," he said, his voice rolling like boulders down a lunar cliffside, "I know you can speak, so let us dispense with the coy little game where I pretend I do not know your worth, and you pretend that you are not glad to be rid of your family."

I shrugged amiably.

"I do not find it useful to have a homunculus about the house—I manage to keep it clean enough, and I do not have troublesome relations to spy upon, lest they make off with my wealth. But I do find your stature valuable—it is new, I have not seen such a thing before. Bodies are a specialty of mine. How would you like to get out of yours?"

I looked down at my hands, no bigger than acorns, my delicate fairy-feet, my tiny body which would never be able to walk through a street without

danger of being gobbled up by a passing sparrow. “Such a thing cannot be, sir, much as I might wish it could.”

For the first time the Man Dressed in the Moon smiled, and his face opened up like a pomegranate cracking. “On the contrary, my diminutive friend. And call me Father. I think that’s best, considering, don’t you?”

He gathered me into his cool, colorless palm again, and together we passed through a thick door and down a long, winding staircase that doubled over and back upon itself, so that it seemed to ascend and descend at the same time. I could not tell where we were, except that the walls became rocky and damp, and I had the sense of being very deep underground. Finally, we emerged into a room filled with people of all shapes, sexes, and descriptions. They were leaned against the walls like rolls of carpet, blond maiden against gray-haired grandfather against sweet-skinned child. In and among the human beauties were strange creatures: Basilisks and Leucrotta and Monopods with their single huge, twisted feet jutting awkwardly into the freezing air—for the room was chill as a witch’s heart, and frost spackled the ceiling. Their eyes were serenely shut.

The Man Dressed in the Moon gestured expansively at his collection. “Choose! Every possible combination of features is represented here—will you have breasts or a beard? Will you have the dark skin of an Eastern Prince? Will you have a child’s slender arms? All you must do is give up that wretched little form and I will dress you in a new one, sewn up as tightly as a bride’s bodice! It is no more effort to me than shifting a lamp from one table to another. We must simply kill you, snuff out your little breath, and all will be well. Let me tell you how it is done…”







My people have always had rights over the bodies of humans. We were born when the first rays of Mother Moon glided over the surface of the first ocean's face. From the primal water the Yi rose, and we suckled at the rim of the Moon, which in those days touched the sea and churned the salt waves beneath.

Moon taught us how to die. We had to learn it by rote and practice—it is not an easy thing for us. The others, the sun-children, die so naturally and gracefully; for us it is like solving a difficult equation without pen or paper.

Moon taught us that it was our right to take the bodies of the dead—we were hers, and just as the night was her province, the cold and the dead were ours. It was her gift to us, you understand, so that we could taste every kind of life, from the meanest to the most exalted. All the secrets of bloodless flesh she showed to us in the first days of the world. She showed us that it is possible to swim through bodies as a fish through coral; death clears a place for us. But one cannot swim through a living sea; the swimmer and the water must be equally mortified. So, in order to pass from flesh to flesh, we had to learn to die.

The first of us did not succeed—they went under the waves and breathed easily, instinctively. They went into the fire and became incandescent. They dove from high cliffs and their shoulder blades unfolded into wings like origami breaking. They cut open their veins with bone knives and found themselves only lightened and made translucent as diamonds by the lack of

blood. We began to despair. The sun-children were prodigies: They died easily all around us, like daisies in winter.

I was the first to discover it. I sat beneath Moon with my mouth on her icy fingers, considering the problem. It seemed to me that we were a race of suicides—it was only our own bodies we flagellated, our own skin we removed like clothing. If we instead helped each other into death, if we made of it a sacrament, then perhaps we could manage the feat.

I went to one of my sisters and knelt before her, begging her to strangle me, to put out my eyes and burn my heart in a clay kiln. My theory babbled out of me like a brook flooding down a mountain, so eager was I to become the first of my people to master the art of death. She, too, was eager and curious, and put her slim, blue-white fingers around my throat, squeezing until I crumpled at her feet like a discarded blanket.

Thus was the first murder committed among the Yi. The celebration lasted for seven days and nights; the silver lanterns swayed and sweet waltzes were played on chalcedony pipes. Our star-spattered world was suddenly a cacophony of death as we leapt from our bodies into the bright limbs of the sun-children. Of course, once we had died the first time, we lost the adamant moon-flesh which was ours by birthright. But we found that the longer we remained in our new bodies, the more they came to resemble our old ones: The color seeped from the eyes and the skin grew pale as shadowless craters. After a few years in the body of a milkmaid, we looked quite ourselves again.

Of course, the sun-children, both human and monster, were terrified by this power. I cannot say why—certainly they had left the bodies, they no longer had any rights to them, and Moon had granted them to us by perfectly legal charter. But they turned from us in horror and forced us to wear gray, pockmarked cloaks so that they could tell us apart from their dead beloveds in the years before we turned the flesh back into our own. Once, they captured a boy not long dead while the Yi in him was weak and did not know his new muscles well enough to resist them. They kept him in a dark well, away from the eye of Mother Moon, and tortured him with boiling oil and thumbscrews and insidious poisons until he revealed some part of our secrets—though never, of course, the technique of traveling into cold flesh. These torturers

went to Al-a-Nur and poured mortar into the foundations of the Tower of the Dead, where they practice a mutilated form of our art.

In the midst of our ecstatic dance from corpse to corpse, Moon came down to us while we slept, and spoke into the shell-ear of each Yi. She promised that when one of us—just one—had tasted every kind of life the garden of the sun's world could prepare for us, we could return to her, and dwell in a sea of light, cradled forever in her opaline arms.

And so we leap high, our starlit toes touching briefly on each form, human and monster—and we seek out every shade of claw and eye, so that we may return to the night and Moon's primal pale.



The Man Dressed in the Moon looked down at me with his blanched eyes and smiled, the sparse hairs on his chin quivering.

"I am a great collector, you see. I hold all these bodies in trust for my brothers and sisters, so that they may have a ready supply when they tire of their current ones. Quite a steady stream of Yi come and go from me like a river whistling its water under the moon—come an old crone and leave a young man, come an ice-haired northerner, go a southerner with cinnamon skin. The discards—well, all things must eat, and there is a feast day here every fort night. But you! We have seen nothing like you! We must add your body to our treasury—in exchange you may have one of your choice."

I suppose I might have been shocked, but all I could think of was long, lithe limbs and a height which would tower over my father's. I agreed as easily as if he had offered to trade me a wooden wheel for a pair of chickens.

He held me up to each row of faces in a most considerate fashion, and I pondered them all in turn. I finally settled upon a youth with skin the color of aged brandy-wine, whose eyebrows arched in a noble, bemused way over his smoke-lashed eyes. He was very tall.

"Ah, excellent choice, my son! That was Marsili—long ago he was a Sultan's son, betrothed to a maiden of unearthly beauty, whose eyes were yellow as a wolf's. But he angered his father in some way or another—gambling or whoring, most likely; young men are so prone to such vices—and the Sultan in his wisdom sold the boy to me and married the girl himself. I'm told there is a

whole dynasty of wolf-eyed Sultans somewhere in the East. And he is no loss to us. Believe me, we long ago exhausted the tawdry experiences of a spoiled Prince." He pushed up his gray sleeves. "Shall we begin?"

I blinked twice, my heart thumping in me like an overworked bellows. "But I… I cannot strangle you, Father, I haven't anything like the strength."

His face broadened amiably.

"Oh, I needn't be dead—I am not going to take your body myself. The Yi are communal. It is just as well that any other of my race uses it. A simple process and a cold room keep the bodies intact until they are needed. Only you must die. It will be a very small death, I promise. It will feellike you have swallowed a great portion of bread that has become stuck in your throat, somewhere between your mouth and your belly. Of course, a simple drink of water would push the bread down where it ought to go, but there is a curious feeling of *stretching,* of *bulging*. That is what a small death is like."

This did not sound so very terrible. I straightened myself to my full height—no larger than a grasshopper—and locked my arms as I imagined brave soldiers in war must.

"I am ready, Father. You may kill me now."

"Mustn't damage the body!" he chirped happily, and clamped his great clammy hand over my nose and mouth. He held it there, the smell of gardenias cloying, while I struggled and sucked at the skin for air. Finally, I slackened and slumped into the curve of his thumb.

He was right, it was very like swallowing too much bread. First the alarm and panic, then the curious *stretching,* then the sliding release of bread into the belly. I did not float above my body as some say one does—I stood beside it, very calmly, as though I had simply been doubled. I watched the Man Dressed in the Moon pass my tiny body through a wash of strange, viscous fluid the color of costly ink. Then, pulling the slack form of Marsili from the ranks, he anointed its forehead with a musky-smelling oil. Finally, he placed an oblong white stone in the corpse's mouth and whispered a few words I could not hear over its bent head.

It was as though I blinked, and when I opened my eyes again, they were Marsili's eyes. When I flexed my hands they were Marsili's hands. When I

spoke it was with Marsili's honey-wine voice, cultured by years of tutors. The stone had vanished from my mouth.

"I am… I am him!" I cried, looking the Man Dressed in the Moon directly in the eye. It was a silly thing to say, of course, but I could almost have wept for the joy of touching the cool ceiling with my fingers.

From that day I begged to be his apprentice, to learn this magic so that I would never have to die a big death. He saw no point, as the Moon was no mother to me. I could not but stand at the foot of the Yi's long ladder to her. But after some time he relented, being lonely or curious or both, and I began my long education. Any sacrament can be practiced by unbelievers, he always said. It's usually nothing more than eating and drinking, anyway. I could drink all I liked, and nothing I ever drank would become the Moon in my mouth—but drinking is pleasant enough without the promises of religion. And I was always pleasant to him.

I kept the name of my first other-body. It amused me, as it seemed neither male nor female, and there were many more forms to follow, of both sorts. I am not Yi: The bodies do not crumble around me. I simply move to the next fleshly costume when I tire of them. I do not truly understand what it is in the spirit of a Yi which corrupts a body around it, but I was never to suffer that dissolution. I was a good student; eventually, I even helped the Man Dressed in the Moon to pass to his next body. I knelt reverently and cut open his stomach, and prepared the next body for his passing. I placed the white stone on his new tongue; I was the first face he saw with his new eyes—which were wide and violet as a field of lilacs, the eyes of a still-lovely dowager who had died of chill.

It was in that body that the Man Dressed in the Moon became my lover. The Yi are in truth neither male nor female, but follow the desires of their host bodies—and there never was a dowager who did not yearn to have a young Prince as her paramour. We passed many years in this way, and even when the dowager's flesh became gray and cratered, I did not mind. I kissed those peeling, pockmarked limbs, and they were sweet, sweet as dried gardenias. We continued in this way until we exhausted each other—for neither was there ever a dowager who did not eventually grow bored with her beardless playmate—and I went from that house into the world.

All this I learned; all this I performed. When I left his house, no Nurian corpse-wrangler could have approached my knowledge, though her lust for it might burn like winter timber. When my parents died, I took their bodies—ah, the debauch to which I subjected *those* limbs! I punished them in their own skin.

But I am not Yi. I do not take bodies in order to achieve some mystical union with a mythical Moon. What I do, I do for pleasure, and for profit, and it is pleasant enough. I am not bound by their laws, I need wear no barnacled cloak, and so I move among the people of Shadukiam unknown and unmarked —and only once or twice have I been too impatient to wait for a creature to die.

For I am not Yi; I can take them while they still breathe.

I am not Yi; I will go on forever, in whatever body I choose, and the Moon will never take me.



"So put your dainty little mark on one of those famous parchments. It has always been true that a figurehead's only power lies in her golden seal—no one cares what you say, but we all care what you sign. Give me access to the Caliph's rose-tinted gold, sign open the door to the great vault, and I will keep your spirit safe until the time comes for you to return in a body as ravishing or de formed as you wish, until your name is forgotten by all but the most dotard librarians in the Dreaming City, and no one will drag an army after you again."

"You don't want…" I looked down, blushing.

"What? Your firstborn child? Use of those lissome limbs? I'm not a monster out of some child's tale. I have no need of living bodies, and children are more costly and troublesome than beasts twice their size. Do you think there is a pleasure of the flesh I have not sampled? I do not need the Caliph's trash. I am a magician—it is a vocation like any other, and I require remuneration for my services, as any other tradesman would. Would you try to pay for grain with unborn babes? I think not. Do not insult me; I am no less skilled than a miller grinding his seed."

I nodded humbly, and the necromancer kissed my shuddering lips then, and my brow, my hair, my chin. It was not in lust that his lips brushed my face, but as a strange sort of seal on the bargain as I eagerly scrawled his demand onto a used and crumpled leaf of paper—on the one side it demanded that the merchant-monks of the Coral Tower open their vaults to the Caliph; on the other it demanded that the vault of the Caliph be opened to Marsili.

"What do I do now? How do I know you will keep your promise?" I asked, clutching my elbows to my sides.

"You will know because I have sworn it, and you are the trusting kind. You may want to work on that, the next time you see this city from the inside. This is Shadukiam, after all. Here the trusting are found every morning in one gutter or another. You need do nothing more, sweet Ragnhild, little ragged girl, left all alone." He reached forward and wound a thin length of my hair through his fingers, then, with a sharp flick of his wrist, tore it from my head. "Wait to die." With that, he retreated from the antechamber, bowing gratuitously as he went.

And die I did. The Nurian Papess dragged me from my seat by the ear as though I were no more than a misbehaving child and forced me to my knees before my own altar. With a strange, curving silver knife she cut my tongue from my mouth, and the taste of blood, the meaty, metallic taste of my blood, flooded my mouth. I screamed, I screamed—I thought there would never be an end to the screaming. She moved the knife in the air speculatively; with ridiculous attention I noted its sickle shape, its hilt, the fine engraving. In the midst of pain like stones breaking open the knife filled my vision. I thought then it would be my nose next, or my eyes. I did not understand yet the shape of zealotry.

Ghyfran, the savior of Al-a-Nur, ripped my dress from collar to waist, and cut my breasts from my body as if carving a roasted bird for her supper. But when they had sloughed to the floor with a sickly, wet sigh, she leaned into me, her breath brushing my ear.

"I have saved you, poor, wretched pawn. Now you may go to the dark as a sacred Androgyne, and no door of alabaster or diamond will be closed to you."

That is your heroine-priest, this lying whore who forswore her god in order to kill an innocent—then forswore her oaths of office with her adherence to her mad faith. What is Al-a-Nur but a bedchamber where you may luxuriate in lies and blasphemies, convincing yourselves that they are virtues?

They tied me to that wet, grassy hill, pressing up under my back like the bones of the moon, and the soldiers dangled these chains in my face, mocking me—it was the only gold, they said, I would ever get from Al-a-Nur.

The rest is simple, unutterably common. The sun took my flesh away in its arms, and the moon whitened my bones to dust. I fell away from myself, into some deep well of dreaming—I recall nothing from the last gasp until I awoke, washed in gray light. The necromancer Marsili had bound me bodiless in some strange glass vial, and I watched him as the years flew by like blackbirds—sometimes he was a woman, sometimes a man, sometimes a child as he had been when first he came to me. But I learned to recognize him in each body, the upturn of the eye, the cruel crooked mouth, the gestures of his hands. I learned, and more than that. The necromancer performed many horrible things in his workshop, and I learned from him all the magic he learned from his bodies. After all, he was the only thing I saw for all those years. I had nothing to do but become a student of his every sigh and gesture.

And yet, he waited, he waited for so long. I thought he had forgotten me, that I would be stuck in a bottle like a scrawled note forever. But one midnight, when I had almost lost the memory of what it was to feel my own flesh, he picked up my vial and brought it to a long table, where a golden-haired corpse lay stiff and still.

"You are only a legend now, Ragnhild. It is safe to come out; it is safe to live. The world remembers you only as a ghost in the closet, a wight on the grassy hills." He gestured at the glassy-eyed corpse on his knotted elm-wood table. "I keep my word, as any merchant does. She loved a boy her parents could not accept and starved herself to death for the lack of him. Terribly romantic. Are you ready, is she sufficient?"

He sensed my consent in some fashion of his own, and when I woke again, my lids were fringed in lashes pale as raw flax, the weight of a body pulled once more at my bones, and the last vapors of a white stone were still dissolving on my tongue.



Ragnhild looked down at us, anger streaming from her as though from a dying star. "This time I went to no man's bed. I have had time, and time piled high upon time, to consider how I would spend my new body—and I chose to be in truth what I was before only in jest. I will be your Black Papess, and take Al-a-Nur for my own. I bought the Caliph's blessing on my ascension with Marsili's gold, and came to Shadukiam, not on a litter like some pampered babe, but walking on the stony earth, and I did not lower my eyes when I saw once more the Dome of Roses."

I swallowed hard. "And Marsili? He gave over his wealth just to bring you back to this little room?"

Her face folded into a satisfied smile, and the Black Papess rose from her flowered chair, the violet gown shifting and trailing obscenely over her skin. She walked past us slowly, without fear, and drew aside a thick cream-colored curtain covering an alcove behind us.

On a deep green cushion edged in silver rested the head of a young, dark-haired beauty, the line of her nose clearly noble, the shape of her lips suggesting an ineffable refinement. The colors of death spoiled her skin into a bluish ravage, and dried blood clotted around her severed neck. Ragnhild turned her head delicately as though appraising the artistry of a statue.



“I watched him for five hundred years, trapped in that glass like an ant in amber. I hated him. The first real hate I had ever known—the first of many. I have begun to keep a catalogue of hatreds, and this was the first in my ledger: the hatred of the trapped thing. He waited so long. I think he would have left me there if he were not bound by love of this city to provide the service he was contracted for. That is the soul of Shadukiam, after all. He was my first act in this flesh—I took his head and his gold in one stroke. You mustn’t pity him. What kind of a man seduces a child into centuries of death-which-is-not-death for a few rubies from the Caliph’s table? He was a fool and a glutton.”

She closed the curtain with a slow hand and turned back to us, bright-faced.

“Will you kill me now or will you wait for a less guarded opportunity? I admit I’ve been wondering if the inevitable attempt would be daring enough to come while I am ensconced in my antechamber, attendants a mere door’s width away—or if the new oath-breakers would wait until I was asleep. For you are oath-breakers, are you not? Your order forbids violence, and yet, here you are. How very Nurian of you—the will of the gods is supreme unless the Papacy needs a puppet.”

Bartholomew walked to her very slowly, his head bent in real respect, and when he spoke he made his voice as comforting as our snouts and lolling tongues can manage. We held our breaths, waiting to leap to his aid the moment she moved.

“I am sorry for you. I am sorry that you were once innocent and young, and that the Caliph used you for his ends. I am sorry that you have had to come such a long way, through such suffering and foul magic. I wish that you had been allowed to stay a tender of wiry goats in the sweet-breathed mountains. I wish that we had not heard your story. But you do not know Al-a-Nur simply

because you once died at its hand. That you cannot comprehend the selflessness of Cveti-who-became-Ghyfran, or the pity, the love, she must have felt for you, to administer the last sacrament of her faith to a nonbeliever, tells me no more than that you are not fit to be the lowliest novice, let alone the Papess of our spiritual menagerie. You could never understand what we suffer for the sake of that beautiful garden of gods, or why we would incur this stain on our souls so that others may live free of sin. I am sorry, terribly sorry, that you have wagered so much for vengeance when all who harmed you are dead, and that you must fail now, before you could see the spires of the Twelve Towers catching the dawn light and spinning it into a fall of crystal. Before you could even begin what you must have planned all those years in your little vial. But we have sworn, and we are, if nothing else, obedient dogs."

All this while, I and Balthazar had inched towards her, and when our brother stepped back, with tears in my eyes, I leapt and closed my teeth over her throat, but my jaws snapped on empty air. Ragnhild stood suddenly behind Balthazar, and she smiled sweetly, like a little child with a caramel.

It seemed to each of us that her face floated before ours in all its frigid beauty. It seemed to us that she bent her lips to our panting muzzles, and her breath smelled of bundles of violets clutched to the breasts of dead maidens, of gauze stretched over noble profiles and coins pressed into eye sockets. It seemed to us that she kissed our mouths, and our eyes clouded over with red and black, our bellies trembled and boiled in our skin. We were maddened, frenzy licked at our brains, we could not breathe for the blood screaming like blades sharpening inside us.

Ragnhild stood utterly still, a pale column against the wall as we spat and snarled, squaring off against each other. She inclined her head, ever so gently, towards Barnabas.

How can I tell you, little sister? How can I give words to what we did? We, who would not eat the slowest fox or hare! We, who loved each other as limbs of one body! How can I confess? How can I speak of it as though it were no more or less than any other act I have committed, as though it were not the greatest sin of my heart, of my tongue, of my teeth!

At the nod of her head we threw ourselves onto the smallest of us, onto Barnabas, our sweet brother, and devoured him leg by arm by torso, blood

swirling rich and smoky in our mouths. We howled up from the ruin of his belly, not in mourning, but in hunger and delight. We snapped at each other, quarreling over the choicest bits. We were no more than dogs, though the hands that held him and the fists that punished his spine were those of men. Our minds fled from us, we exulted in his death.

And Ragnhild swept from the slaughter room without a sound, as though her feet did not touch the crystal floor.



Bags shook his head miserably.

"I can still taste him," he whispered, barely giving breath to his words. "Taste his flesh, like ash and lye. We will never be clean of this. She let us leave the city unmolested—what else could she do to us? She had already ensorcelled us into betraying our faith and our brother, she had already made all our vows, our holy will, useless with a kiss. We are lost, and we cannot even say it was for the greater good—she lives, and danger still stalks the City like a cat in the grass."

He held his hands out to me helplessly.

"She is coming, she is coming and she will madden us all. Poor Barnabas—he sits heavy in my belly and I will never hear him extol the sweetness of blueberries again."

"She is coming, yes. And she does not want to destroy Al-a-Nur, she wants to *best* it. She wants to prove to the world that we are all liars and heretics and faithless grotesques. That she is holy and we are demons. *That* is why she let us go. We are her first victory," Balthazar snapped, his voice bursting from behind me and startling both Bags and me.

Bartholomew sidled up to his brother and added in a thick voice: "However wretched her origins, she chose freely to continue her crimes against us from the moment she woke to this life. It is easy to forgive beautiful women, especially when they lay a sorrowful tale before you like a sugar-dusted meal. It does not mean they deserve forgiveness. We must tell Yashna that we have

failed and accept punishment. And we must close the gates against the Apostate, for I do not doubt that she is, as you say, coming."

Bags snuffled away his tears and turned his face from his brother. Shame radiated from his hunched body. When we broke camp in the morning, he leaned over my shoulder and whispered:

"There is a debt between us. If you have a grief that weighs on you, I will take it."

I smiled as brightly as I was able and lied. "I am too young to carry suffering on my back like a pauper's pack."

He nodded distractedly. "Then I will repay my debt when you have grown."

It was only two days later that we saw the gleam of Al-a-Nur flare in the distance like the birth of a dozen stars. My breath caught itself in a net of wonder, and the Salmon Gate rose up finally before me, silver and quartz, carved fish leaping with eyes of onyx, metallic waves brushing their delicate fins. I had come home, to the truest home of my deep bones.

The rings of the City were thronging with monks and priests of all kinds, each wearing costumes that clearly held some meaning for them, but that to me were simply bright splashes of color and patterns wriggling like merry snakes over the fine fabrics. Many sat in small groups, bent over a circular game board and loudly cheering each player's move.

"That is Lo Shen, little love," Bartholomew said, "our sacred Game. It is prayer as well as a Game—the object is to defeat the opposite player's God, surrounding that chief piece with involved patterns of the lesser pieces. The entire City plays at one level or another. It is very complex, but you will learn."

The brothers, though their errand was urgent, seemed to drag themselves through the sparkling city, reluctant to reach its center. Instead, they guided me through its streets, inching closer to the innermost Tower with each step. As ever, they buried their sorrow in the cairns of their wolf hearts, and behaved as happily as the rest of the Anointed City.

The markets were manned by men and women dressed in vivid yellow garments, clasped at the shoulders with a fabulous crest: a golden rooster wrestling a peacock encrusted with bright blue stones. With each sale, which only occurred after extensive and enthusiastic haggling, they bowed deeply and anointed the head of the buyer with water—they were, I learned, the

merchant-monks of the Coral Tower. Balthazar explained that the exchange of goods was for them a ritual honoring their chief goddess, Ge-Sai, Star-of-Gold, who in the first days gave birth to all the precious things of the world. Each coin they earn brings the children of Ge-Sai together under the eyes of their mother. The rooster and peacock represent finery for its own sake struggling with finery for the sake of the world—for the peacock's pride is its functionless beauty, while the rooster crows up the sun each day, and his feathers echo the colors of his charge.

Through the streets, whose smells and raucous sounds seemed like an endless carnival, strode the Draghi Celesti, masked in ivory serpent-faces, priests and priestesses of the Tower of Ice and Iron, guardians of the city. Their uniforms were silver and blue, over-tunics emblazoned with a curling winged snake which extended from shoulder to ankle. They were not belligerent, but seemed as merry as any of the Lo Shen players, joking and sparring in the streets. They consulted with the rather plump women of the Tower of the Nine Yarrow Stalks, who were every one of them Oracles of great skill. Bags snickered that they were so fat because they were expert *extispicers,* readers of entrails—a great deal of meat was left over after each ritual, and as they believed waste to be a sin, the women were forced to have a great many feasts.

As we ventured into the interior of the city, I saw the home of my companions, the Chrysanthemum Tower, thrusting up through the earth like a living thing. Indeed, it was entirely hidden in a vast cloak of chrysanthemums, yellow and red and orange, all crowding together like flames licking at a new branch. But at the door, guarded by two impeccably groomed Cynocephaloi brandishing garden shears—for it was necessary to prune the flowers from the door each hour, so eager were the blossoms to engulf the stone—Bartholomew, Bags, and Balthazar stopped and turned solemnly to me. Bags knelt and smiled his toothy smile.

"It is unlawful for those who have not committed their lives to the Tower to enter. If you wish to live in Al-a-Nur, you must choose a Tower—naturally, we hope you will choose ours, but we cannot guide your decision."

"On the bright side," Bartholomew added cheerfully, "you are somewhat limited. You have not the training to be an Oracle, nor a Draghi. They require

entrance in early childhood—you would not pass the first of their tests. You cannot join the Tower of Patricides—"

"Why not?" I protested.

"You are not male. The Patricides are separated into father and son dyads. The father raises his son in the traditions of the Tower, and when the son arrives at the age of Enlightenment, he kills his father—who is normally quite elderly by the time his son is ready to perform the rites. The son then grows to have his own children by women from outside the order, and the cycle continues."

"That's barbaric!" I cried, disgusted. My own father had died when I was an infant, and my fury leapt up as quickly as a pheasant bursting from the grass.

"It is done with great care and love," Balthazar explained gently, "and the solemnity of the ritual is touching—for them, to kill the father is to release the son from the shadow of that great man, and to place your death in the hands of a beloved son is the most noble way to perish. We do not judge. We never judge. Nevertheless, you are equipped with neither male aspect nor a father, and so could not enter the Tower. And since it is rather clear to us that you are female, the Tower of Hermaphrodites is also barred to you—the secret must be kept from all, and we are already aware of your sex."

"You are left with the Tower of Sun-and-Moon," Bartholomew went on, "who have their eyes turned ever upwards, charting the courses of the heavens, and ever earthwards, watching for glimpses of dustbound Stars. They collect ways of worshipping—some say the Stars were chewed out of a black horse, some out of a woman whose skin was the sky, some say they were awled in the belt of heaven, or worried out of the keel of an infinite ship by celestial mice. The Tower has all their gospels catalogued. But the Stars are not gods, they say; they are just lost children, as we all are. They are the most ancient order among us, and also the poorest, for the educated and wealthy have palates refined towards more complex and colorful faiths.

"The Nightingale Tower, too, would take you: Their method of worship lies in music, and the filling of the heavens with their songs, for they serve the sibling-Stars Chandra and Anshu, who made the first music of the world between them with their illuminate voices. There are also Towers of the Living and the Dead. With the Living you would be bonded to a creature: a falcon, or

a wildcat, or a serpent, even a little green mantis—for they believe that divinity resides in even the smallest of beasts, and that they are the voices of heaven. Your union with the creature would be absolute; you would hunt and live and die as one being.

"In the Tower of the Dead, you would study the bodies of all those who die in the City—blood-magic and lymph-magic and the arcana of rigor mortis. They believe that this life is only an initiation, that death is the beginning of enlightenment. The corpse is the vessel of knowledge; the soul goes on to other spheres, leaving the body saturated with the secrets of this world. They worship the Manikarnika, who are long dead, their bodies long lost, and raise altars to their ghosts."

"But which one is right? The real gods? The truth?" I asked.

Balthazar smiled gently, as if speaking to a very slow child. "That is not for us to judge. Each of us believes what seems true enough to him, and allows others the same luxury. Who can know what happened in the dim dawn of the world? We can barely decide what to have for breakfast without a theological debate—the Nurian law is polite disagreement. We do our best with how the world appears to our own eyes."

Bags snorted and scratched behind his furry ear. "I think you're forgetting one, brother."

"Oh, yes," said Bartholomew, dismissively, "the Tower of St. Sigrid, which, while we certainly do not judge, is hardly a religion at all. They follow in all things the example of the philosopher-mariner, Saint Sigrid of the Boiling Sea, who was neither a Star nor any other sort of god, and whose feats change each time you ask a Sigrid about their Lady. She was a great navigator, they say. She was a sea-goddess in the lands of old. She was a humble oarswoman. She had three breasts and grew a beard. Who can tell? They are secretive, and they ply the river's current on ships of cypress-wood and tell no one of their rites."

"And there is our own Tower," said Bags fondly, "the Chrysanthemum. And of us you know already—*The Book of the Bough* and *The Book of Carrion,* the sanctity of plants, of all growing things, which give us of their own lives so that we may live." He tousled my hair as if I were a child. "Of course, all the Towers are specialized and rarefied faiths—some have to do with the countryside faith

of the Stars, some do not. Religion is a starchy dish, and we spice it more exotically here."

I breathed deeply, intoxicated by the variety of Towers and people—my village had contained no more than a few hundred souls, and only one Temple, little more than a cave of ice in the mountainside. But I did not have any particular predilection for birds or cats, beyond the eating of them; I could neither sing nor play any instrument at all. In the end, I decided that I had spent half my life already in the worship of the sky—I had given enough to them, more than enough. And, much as it shamed me to think it, I did not wish to bow down to flowers and never again eat venison rich with spices. I saw no sin in it; it was not in my nature. And this left but one Tower.

"I will not say I have decided—I know so little! But take me to the Tower of St. Sigrid…"

In the Garden

The girl's eyes seemed to reflect the moonlight, silver tracks appearing in the solid black of her skin. Her voice had suddenly ceased, cutting off her tale like a fisherman tying off his line. She looked into the distance at the waving plum trees, their leaves glinting dark and light as the wind shuffled them lazily. The pond rippled silkily beside them, lapping against the cattails and arching roots of bowing willows. The boy shifted, feeling that he was hardly noticed anymore, that the girl was telling her tale to the night itself, and did not even see him sitting before her. Would she now brave his tower window to sit beside him? He feared to leave her, that he might never find her again in the vast Garden, with its labyrinth of hibiscus and jasmine, its flocks of tame birds, their tails glittering like a treasure house, its tall cypresses pointing upwards like hands of pilgrims.

His breath was as short as it ever was when her voice slid into him. Despite his confusion, the city of Al-a-Nur had laid itself out somewhere in his belly, spreading its Towers through his little body, and he had fallen into the trance that the girl could induce in him so easily, roaming those profoundly blue streets and smoke-filled alleys in his own dreaming gait, nibbling a sugared apple bought from a yellow-robed monk, and yearning to vanish into a Tower of his own.

Suddenly the girl focused her attention on him, and his heart leapt like a frog after the moon at its sound.

“I am sorry… sorry that I left you for so long. I didn’t mean for you to be hurt by it.” She hid her face in the shadows, and the boy trembled a little, but did not let it show.

The girl smiled, tentative as a hare in a field, and began again.



Snow's fingers were wet and thick; she could hardly feel the coarse net ropes between them. She turned her head away from Sigrid, shamed. She felt suddenly as if she were a ghost in her own life—this woman had been young and alone like her, and had found her way to a city of gods and wolf-headed friends, whereas Snow had found nothing at all but a cold waterfront and a teasing nickname spoken so often she had forgotten what her real name might ever have been. All she had done was slowly turn the color of this freezing, heartless town, and the color of the sea that battered it with salt. She wondered if she had any blood left in her, or if her body had just filled up with water and cold.

"I wish," she whispered, "that I were as brave and bright as you, that I could go to such a place, and meet such folk, and know about such things."

Sigrid frowned, her curly hair flattened against her broad forehead by the damp, like a monk's tonsure. "That's funny, you know. I spent most of my time in Al-a-Nur wishing I were as brave and bright as Saint Sigrid. We all have someone we think shines so much more than we do that we are not even a moon to their sun, but a dead little rock floating in space next to their gold and their blaze."

Snow breathed on her fingers. Their tips did not warm, even the littlest bit. She looked up sidelong at Sigrid, whose cheeks were whipped to scarlet in the wind.

"I certainly thought everything in the world outshone me then, and Bags the brightest of all, until I met the next brightest of all, and the next…"



Bags agreed to take me to the Tower of S<<span class="small">T. Sigrid before the trio reported to the Papal Tower to finish their unsavory quest. All agreed that it was not appropriate for me to go with them—and no uncommitted youth could be given audience with the Papess. My farewells were made with Balthazar and Bartholomew. Secretly I was not so grieved to leave them as long as Bags was with me—they were both so fierce and serious. Bags was dear to me as a pup to her litter-mate, but his brothers frightened me sometimes, with their solemn yellow eyes and muzzles that seemed to cease their smiles when I turned away.

His rust-colored fur caught the late afternoon sun and turned it into a sweet, merry fire. The darkness of the Black Papess seemed to have slid from him like old clothes once he had crossed the threshold into Al-a-Nur, and his wolfish face wore a wide smile; he seemed to be breathing in the city as we walked.

"It's all right that you're not coming with us, you know. You might be… uncomfortable. Most of the Chrysanthemums are like me—if not Cynocephaloi, other half-breeds of various kinds. The Sigrids are lovely, despite what Bartholomew says. We don't strictly have a deity like most of the Towers. We don't really pay much attention to Stars, either way. The divine is present in the *earth,* in all growing things, all life and all death, and the *Bough* guides us through life, *Carrion* through death. That's enough for me. Bartholomew looks down on some because they don't have any sort of

worship at all, like the Patricides, or because they idolize a person who couldn't possibly be better than any other person—but I never met a Sigrid who wouldn't steer her boat to your aid if you called her, and that's the truth." He giggled behind his brown, splay-fingered hand.

"Of course, they're *terrible* at Lo Shen. They can't help it—they lead with their Triremes every time." Suddenly he stopped, and a shadow passed over his face like a cormorant's wing. "I wonder if we'll be allowed to enter our Tower again. I don't think there is divinity to be found in the death we gave." He snapped back to me as quickly as he had gone into himself. "Ah, here we are."

The Tower of St. Sigrid was a mammoth spire made entirely of broken ships. Prows jutted out at all angles, long keels and tall masts wrapped the walls, rigging and sails like vines and veils hanging haphazard from every window. At the entrance stood a gargantuan ship's wheel, warped and splintered with age, casting its long shadow towards the bolted door. The sentry was a muscular woman whose head had been roughly shaved. Her wide, flat teeth shone brightly. At the sight of her, Bags's eyes lit like lamps on a midwinter night. She greeted my canine friend with an enormous embrace that would have cracked the bones of a musk ox.

"Bags, old mate! You whelp! You never come to see me anymore! Afraid I'll take your God down a peg or two?"

"Not as long as you keep throwing your 'Remes around like they're ten for a penny!" He clapped her prodigious back and rubbed her bald head happily. "I've got a recruit for you, Sigrid—we picked her up on the lichen flats up north. She's a dear, eager little thing, but she hasn't quite made up her mind as to a Tower yet. Likes her morning bacon a bit too much to come in with us." He winked at me and I blushed deeply, ashamed at his guess.

The woman looked at me, her gaze roughly measuring me as if for some bizarre suit of armor. "She's skinny and the hair will have to come off" came the judgment.

Bags rolled his eyes. "She needs to know about your thrice-damned Saint Sigrid so that she can decide, you salty old dog. And I can't stay. We cannot keep the Papess waiting."

At this the woman's brusque expression softened and she dropped an elephantine arm around my shoulders.

"No, no, of course. You go—I trust it went well, or you wouldn't be back. We all… appreciate what you've done, you know, Bagsy. I'll tell skin-and-bones what she needs to know."

Bags's eyes filled with tears—but he hid it well, like a thief slipping a ring into his pocket. He hugged me as tightly as a bear shaking a tree for fruit, his furry face buried in my neck. He whispered a tight *thank you* and turned to go. I reached out to stop him.

"Wait, Bags! When I asked to come, back in my village, you said something strange to the others, something from *The Book of Carrion*. What was it? Tell me!"

Bags grinned, looking impossibly like a cat, and laid his finger aside his nose.

"And the wolf shall lead her astray, unto the edge of the sea, and there she will find the City of the Lost, where her skin will fall away, and the Beast will swallow her whole. Prophecy, love. Best hope it's not you."

When he had gone, the bald woman sat heavily on the snowy ground and gestured with a tattooed hand that I ought to sit beside her.

"He's only teasing. That *Book of Carrion* is full of gibberish and dog-speak. Pay no attention—it means less than a flapping sail in a strong wind. I'll tell you the way of things. I'm called Sigrid—we've all taken the name of the great Lady, in her honor. I don't care in the least what your name is; it'll be Sigrid if you want to sail with us, anyhow. Listen to this old deckhand, and I'll tell you the tale of the Great Navigator…"



In the name of the Mother, and the Monster, and the Mast, Amen.

In the fifteenth year of the Second Caliphate, a child was born in the Blessed City of Ajanabh to a family of traveling spicers whose fingers smelled forever of cinnamon and coriander. Their barge stayed in the port of Ajanabh for many years, but they were not native to the city that witnessed the birth of the Saint. Where they came from in truth is lost to us now. Indeed, Ajanabh seemed not to recognize the Blessing of Heaven, and tried many times to expel the merchant barges, which were as great in number as flocks of sparrows in the autumn sky, from their Great Harbor, claiming that the families brought disease and sloth with them from notorious lands.

The child was christened Sigrid, and she was a great beauty even as a girl, with rich brown skin and thick hair the color of all her family's spice stores milled into a shade of dark brown shot through with gold and red, and eyes the color of a lion's paw. But she had been born with a strange deformity which brought a secret shame onto the backs of her parents. Her father wept and accused her mother of coupling with a demon; her mother suspected that their family gods had turned against them and delivered them a daughter with harpy blood.

For Sigrid was possessed of three breasts, and as she grew, this strangeness became impossible to hide. So each morning before taking her daughter to the spice market, her mother bound her breasts with lengths of rough cloth. Each morning, she patted Sigrid's cheek and stifled tears as she wound the fabric.

When she became a woman, Sigrid performed this penance herself, crushing her small but plainly monstrous chest beneath straps of leather and buckles of lead.

After a long while, she stopped weeping while she did it.

When Sigrid had reached the age of sixteen—as all men know, this is the age at which such catastrophes of serendipity occur—a troupe of pirates attacked the floating city of harbor barges. This was not uncommon in Ajanabh, which was in those days altogether a raucous network of villain-strewn streets; an Ajan never touched a gold piece which had not been stolen at least thrice in its lifetime. But the barges were sacrosanct, bargers being themselves distant cousins to pirates. So when the *Maidenhead* sailed into the Great Harbor, her red sails billowing like dead moons in the night, the merchants simply rolled over in their sleep, thinking it would pass them by and ransack the city as such masted beasts had always done.

Instead, the pirates set fire to the skiffs and scows of the spicers and the tinkers, the cobblers and the armorers and the potters.

Sigrid, like her brothers and her parents, slept in her cot, breasts unbound, curled around herself like a snail's shell. She awoke to a hand clamped over her mouth and a toothy hiss in her ear:

"Hush now, precious. Wouldn't want to wake Mama." The voice's owner scooped her up into its arms like a cat snatching the scruff of her kitten's neck. In a whirl of smoke and flame, Sigrid found herself dragged across the barge of her birth and away—and thus did she exit a tale which surely would have comprised a life of derision and exclusion, ending in a cinnamon-and-coriander-scented corpse shoved overboard into the Bay of Ajan.

Instead, Sigrid was deposited by her abductor onto the deck of a shadowed ship, and entered another tale entirely.

In truth, her family was not sorry to see her go. They would never have been able to induce a man to marry her, even with sacks of musky saffron to barter. It seemed to them best to cherish their other, beautifully shaped children, and let their misshapen daughter go to whatever fate the Stars had ordained for her.

Whatever owned the strange voice had brought Sigrid to the *Maidenhead,* and once the crew had plundered, stolen, and kidnapped as they pleased, the

ship relinquished the harbor as gracefully as a lord sheathing his sword, and unfurled her scarlet sails to catch the salt breath of the open sea.

There is nothing quite like the moment a sail clutches the wind and opens under it like the legs of a merry fishwife. The sound of it, the echoing billow as the air blows out the fabric, the surge forward and the spray in the teeth—it is the sound that heralds the beginning of new worlds, the birth of litters of wish-granting seals in a hundred secret grottos, the grinding of new rivers through mountains which witnessed the first flood and chuckled at their wet toes.

It filled Sigrid's heart like wine into an oak barrel. She leaned over the rail and grinned into the sound, marveling at the ship that now carried her—the cannons were worked into the shapes of animal heads, mouths agape. Along one side screamed silent manticores, on the other, crocodiles gaped wide. The ship itself shone a rich red color—some strange wood she had never seen before. The mast was massive and tall, seeming to bruise the stars, and from its polished surface sprouted glossy green leaves and branches the size of children's arms. It was a tree, a living tree drinking from the sea and sky, bearing the sails and lines with good nature. It did not seem to mind the salt or the rough wind, but opened its leaves like glad hands. Where the crow's nest ought to have been was an explosion of branches heavy with leaf and orange fruit, thick enough to bear a lookout. The sails were deep red, and Sigrid wondered if this was not a very disreputable pirate ship to flout the sage tradition of black sails. The rails were curled and carved with arcane designs—it was unlike any ship she had ever seen in Ajanabh, and unlike, she suspected, any ship on the dark-waved sea.

The usual bustle of a ship under way streamed around her, for the most part ignoring the new passenger, as sailors are wont to do. But they were an unusual crew. Besides the standard complement of inhuman creatures galloping—yes, she certainly saw a Satyr and possibly a small-shouldered Centaur—or slithering—that woman struggling with a bag puffing yellow spices was surely a Lamia—across the decks, the ship appeared not to possess a single male occupant.



“How do you like her, my Ajan waif?” The strange voice sounded again from behind her, soft and hard altogether, like a golden hammer sheathed in fur. Sigrid turned and beheld a large part of her destiny: Long-Eared Tomomo, captain of the good ship *Maidenhead*. Tomomo was strange-looking for that part of the world, but not un-handsome—her eyes were dark and desultory, her hair long and black, straighter than a crow’s leg, her skin like oft-touched ivory, its shade having long since lost its white to the strokes of many fingers. Her dress was not garish, as the coats of pirates so often are, but simple stag-skin vests and trousers, and her hair bound in a long braid that brushed her thighs. Later, Sigrid would often hear her refuse the captain’s hat, with its bouncing peacock feathers and golden buckles, remarking that if she were to die—as she would surely draw attention of the murderous kind in that hat—they might never get the hideous thing off of her, and her gods would laugh at her when she met them in hell.

“The ship, ma’am?” Sigrid paused, unsure. “Sir?”

“Tommy is good enough for my girls and it’s good enough for you. Yes, the ship.” Tommy slapped the rail and rubbed it affectionately. “She’s my prize—a gift from a bird, a tree, and a Witch. Not a nail in her; the whole thing held together with breath and blood and starlight.”

Sigrid swallowed hard. “And you’ll be needing my blood to pay the Witch, I suppose?”

Tommy’s eyebrows arched like bows springing to fire. “I think not. The mess would be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Then why did you take me, if not to kill me? I’m told that’s what pirates do. And besides, you must be the worst kind of pirate if you attacked the Ajan barges.”

The captain smiled and leaned into Sigrid’s face, her expression almost, but not quite, motherly. “We don’t really hold with tradition. We heard there was a monster-girl living on the barges. You’ll learn to trust one kind of rumor and laugh at the other when you live at sea—this was the kind you listen to. When the Stars speak, you listen. Look around; we like monsters here. It’s not easy to crew a ship with only women—girls don’t exactly study to be sailors these days. When we hear of some ghastly beast, we snap her up as soon as we can.”

“So, all of that, the fire and the raid, was for me?”

“Certainly not! We stole plenty of other things—just no other girls. You’re part of our crew now—you’ve been pressed into naval service, my little powdermonkey.”

Sigrid leaned over the rail and stared at the water running past the red hull swift as otters fleeing a hungry shark. She contemplated the loss of her family—which she did not feel greatly—and her new place as a monster among monsters. Though some of the sailors had appeared human, she began now to suspect that none of them truly were. And at that moment, Tommy leaned over the bar alongside her.

Tomomo’s reflection in the water was that of a woman’s body, but it was crowned, not with Tomomo’s smirking face, but with that of a bright-eyed fox, its fire-shaded fur buffeted by the wind.



Snow looked up at Sigrid's wide face carefully as a deer nosing a blackberry bramble.

"I was born in Ajanabh, you know," she said softly.

Sigrid nodded, but it was not precisely a confirmation that she had known. "Then you are blessed as a spring babe—though I'm told it's no more than a shadow of the city it was. All cities are shades of what they were these days; even Muireann was once a metropolis, with towers of ice and silver and queens who sat on tuffets of whale fur drinking Ajan orchid-wine from cups of seal bone. It was the capital of the North, a thousand years past. Now it is a village, an outpost on the hostile sea. Only the Stars recall."

The afternoon had grown fat and red-faced and the first thin wisps of twilight were waiting behind its jowls. Sigrid and Snow worked in unison now, like fiddlers plying their bows.

"Clearly you joined the Sigrids," Snow remarked, keeping her eyes fixed on her friend's prodigious elbows, "or it would be a great coincidence indeed that you are named Sigrid yourself."

"Clearly."

"Yet"—and here Snow blushed, flushing her colorless face with pink—"you don't swear by Saint Sigrid, you swear by the Stars. I think it must have been a very strange road for you, from there to here."

Sigrid's smile crept away from her face like a cat through a door left ajar. She shut her eyes and for a moment Snow thought the hulking creature would

cry. “I am not worthy to swear by her name,” she croaked, her voice like a hundred frogs lost in mourning. “I’ve failed too often, and too profoundly. I was supposed to accomplish a thing—the only thing, I once thought, I was ever meant to accomplish. I abandoned that when the wolves led me astray and into the City of Light. And there I dropped a second destiny from my hands as though it burned me. And now I’ve no destiny left at all, only these nets to tie off like umbilical cords.” Sigrid wiped her nose and shook her head like a horse discouraging flies. “So I lapse. I lapse into the faith I happily held when I was young and I swear by the Stars, for I have yet to do much to offend them. Surely there is some Ajan god you whisper to in the dark?”

“I don’t really remember—my parents died before they could give me a god of my own. I have heard that the Ajans worship the Stars now, since the city died and all the monks left with their complicated new religions. But they also say that the Ajans eat caterpillar pies and fly on wings of horsehair and rose petals. I’ve stopped believing what everyone else says of my home. Anyway, I never heard of a saint being born on the barges.”

“That’s because she wasn’t a saint when she left Ajanabh. It was much later that heaven touched her head. It is rarely the places that birth us that see our true worth. Nor even,” Sigrid added with half a smile, “the places that adopt us. But you may whisper to Saint Sigrid if you like, when you are alone and the Stars are not speaking. She will not mind.”

She cupped the girl’s white head in her large, callused hand. “I had just gotten to Tomomo, had I not?”

“Yes,” Snow breathed. “Go on.”



Sigrid was certainly surprised to see Tomomo with a snout and ears sporting tufts of cream-yellow fur. Yet she seemed to be a pleasant enough beast, and her graceful hands rested on the rail like carefully arranged flowers. In fact, when Sigrid looked up from the water, the captain appeared just the same as she had—her hair was bound as neatly and her lips, grinning merrily, were just as thin and chapped as before, as any seafarer's lips would be. Only the water showed the fox head.

"So I, too, am a monster. Of course, I am almost never discovered, prettiest of all possible barge girls—only the sea's reflection shows this face. I have a natural disguise. Whereas you"—and here Tomomo eyed young Sigrid's chest meaningfully—"must make your own. Yet, like yours, my mother could never bear to look at me. She would not let her eyes meet mine, even when I was a baby; she said she could see an unholy thing moving behind the iris, something watching her which was not her daughter. They like to tell us we are unholy, Sigrid. It makes them feel as though we cannot harm them, for surely they are as holy as we are dirty and foul. But, of course, we can. Let me tell you how I first came to know that I was a monster…"



My mother was particularly dutiful when it came to the binding of my feet, though by the time of my birth, the custom was as antique and unfashionable as stone tools in our country. I believe she thought that if she could confine me to a litter for the remainder of my flower-strewn days, I would not be able to cause much mischief.

Every night I loosened the wrappings and crept from my bed to splash naked in the garden mud. I am sure she knew—after all, my hair was always damp and grass-scented in the morning—but she said nothing, swaddling my toes in raw silk with reproachful glances at my dirt-caked heels.

One year, when I was no more than ten or so, the fortune-teller Majo returned to the capital. This was a great event; though she would not have been received in polite society, her wares were greatly desired by all the ladies of rank. Love potions, spells for a safe childbirth or charms for a male child, talismans for luck and wealth, even incantations to change the weather from drought to rains. Her cart was a thing of wonder, shaped like a tiny, moveable house draped with purple and red cloths, green under-curtains and clanking silver chains, leather charms hanging like fringe from the miniature eaves, crane feathers and cat fur and unguents in clay pots issuing from its dark door. All this Majo carried on her back from town to town—though the shriveled, bony frame of the old Witch seemed hardly equal to the task. When she stopped, stilts unfolded from the bottom of the contraption, and Majo would release the straps that bound it to her to ply her trade.

After dusk, my mother and many other ladies with perfumed wigs and lacquered lips gathered in the pavilion like birds alighting on a fountain, squeaking in delight and waiting breathlessly for the telltale rattle of Majo's cart. I was brought in my litter, resting on rose-colored pillows with my strangled feet propped up so that the blood would drain away from them.

Soon enough it came, singing its dilapidated song of pebbles underfoot and magic practical as cooking. The women pressed around, pushing their coins into Majo's hazel-twig hands and pocketing their charms, their wishes, their scraps of paper to be placed beneath the pillow, their drafts to be swallowed at the next new moon.

Somehow, through the crush of rustling robes and greedy hands, Majo caught my eye with her beady black one. She had only one—the other had been lost somewhere along her travels, some said by a fight with a tiger, some said by a battle with a sorcerer; some even claimed to have scratched it out themselves when a spell had gone awry. The remaining eye clamped on me like a hand, and Majo's spittle-strung lips parted into a smug little grin.

"What is your daughter's name?" she croaked to my mother, without needing to ask which of the powdered ladies she was.

"My child is called Tomomo," Mother answered, her voice quavering.

Majo clicked her tongue twice and produced a yellow pouch from her skirt, tossing it lightly in her hand. "Give her to me and I will give you this—keep it always next to your skin and it will produce one gold piece every time the cock crows."

The women all caught their breath like fishermen snagging fat salmon and murmured among themselves enviously—after all, who cared about a useless girl-child in the face of all that gold?

My mother's eyes flickered furtively from me to the old Witch. Finally, she agreed and snatched the yellow charm, scurrying back to the inner rooms with the rest of the women, full of this new wonder. She kissed me on the cheek and almost as an afterthought warned me to be careful. In a moment, Majo and I stood in the courtyard, alone, save for the marvelous cart.

She said nothing to me, but pulled a great copper pot from her cart and filled it with water from a pitcher so large I could scarcely believe she had concealed it in the folds of her skirt. When the ripples died down to nothing

and the moon shone in the pot like a potato floating in soup, she indicated that I should look into it.

Of course, I saw there my true face, my snout thin and sharp, my moist black nose, my ears flicking curiously in the night wind. I suppose I should have been frightened; my fur was so red and my teeth were so bright. But truly, I was relieved—*this* was the thing my mother saw pacing behind my eyes. I was not wicked, simply a monster.

"There you have it, Tomomo, my girl." Majo patted my back in a strangely congratulatory way.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"We know our own; we can smell it, the scent of fur under skin like sugar dissolved in tea."

She leaned over my shoulder and her face floated beside mine in the water, a mangy wrinkled face with her one eye slashed out, her lower lip scarred and her jowls heavy as saddlebags. We grinned together, and our reflections bared their teeth, hers yellow and blunt, mine white and sharp.

"You belong to me now, little fox-girl. If I had known sooner, I might have spirited you away at birth and found a den for you in the mountains. Now, it is more complicated. You are much too old to join your cousins there. But it does not really matter so much—if you learn well, you may be able to find a place in the world, as I have. But be always wary of water—it reveals us."

She poured out the pot onto the pebbles and packed it away into her cart, pulling wide leather straps over her shoulders and hoisting the miniature house onto her back. The wooden legs snapped up under its floor and Majo sniffed the wind.

"A fox must be always alert and wakeful," she said sternly. "Now that you know that you are one, you have no excuse for this laziness. I have enough to carry without your thrice-damned sedan chair. Get those ridiculous things off your feet."

Happily I ripped them off, chewing at the thick knots with my teeth. I nimbly walked alongside Majo with a heart so full and bright it threatened to burn through my robes.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I am taking you to a place where you can learn things. You have been sleeping on bedrolls soft as clouds lined in silk and feasting on fatted deer. But outside Palace grounds, deer are clever and hard to catch, and bedrolls are too heavy to carry. There are other ways of living, and on the whole, they make for better women. A pity your mother never slept on a cave floor with leaves for blankets—I hope she enjoys her prize. By morning, all the cocks in the capital will have dropped dead, dead as gold and daughters unwanted."

I gawked, unable to imagine so many dead roosters, or how the bent old hag could have managed to leave a wake of strangled chickens behind her. But before I could ask, she was trundling away.

I kept pace, though not easily. She was surprisingly fleet for her age, and I began to understand how she could travel from city to city with such ease. Before long, we were deep into the forest, where bamboo was as thick around as a woman's waist. Before much longer, I could smell the sea, faintly, and damp began to weight my hair. When the night had become cold and clear as pond ice, and we had reached a long beach which was softer underfoot than sweet cakes, Majo spoke again. Her voice was no longer rough and scabbed, but high and sharp, unsurprisingly like the bark of a fox calling to her kits.

"Well, here we are."

"Where is it we're meant to be?" I saw nothing but the long sea, and the breakers foaming white, and a slender pier stretching into the water like a skeletal finger.

Majo rolled her eyes. "A fox must be clever and self-sufficient. Put your educated mind to use and figure it out yourself. I brought you here; my part is finished. I am not a book; you cannot look up the answer in my index." Majo shifted under the weight of her house. I stood there on the sand, nonplussed, trying not to look like a simpleton. She rolled her eyes. "You see the pier? It's the only damned thing around, so why don't you go see if anyone is living under it, hmm? Or shall I just do everything for you like your addle-brained mother?"

Majo released the cart straps from her shoulders and let the wooden legs unfold. She rummaged inside the hutch for a moment and drew out a thick cushion. Settling on it, she pulled a rice ball from her skirts and munched happily on it, gesturing towards the pier and urging me to get on with it. My

cheeks stung as if switch-whipped. I would certainly not be shown as a spoiled brat in Majo's presence. I ran off after the rickety pier, tiny shards of seashell spraying up behind my pounding heels.





It stunk under the rotting slats. Algae and mussels and barnacles stuck to everything in wet clutches; old crab nets tangled in rusted-out clam buckets. I held my hand over my face and nearly gagged—few of those nets and buckets were empty of their last unfortunate victims. I saw nothing here which could be an errand worthy of Majo's attention, and much that would not be worth the attention of even a starving seagull. But she was not wrong, I was sure; she could not be—and indeed, behind a well-chewed pillar, a dark shape scuttled by. I trudged towards it, my bare feet squelching in the tidepools and soggy sand, and soon I was knee-deep in the brine sea, splashing forward in the moonlight after a quick black shape.

"Wait!" I cried, and to my amazement the shape did stop, turning its sleek head back over its shoulder.

It was a large and well-fed otter. It rolled over in the waist-deep water and floated casually on its back, showing a wet golden belly against the rest of its slick, dark brown fur. Its face seemed friendly enough, if not exactly welcoming. Its whiskers were almost as thick as a mustache. In its paws was a large abalone with several bits of shell chipped off—the otter struggled with it, glancing up at me from behind its stubborn prize.

"What?" it said, and its voice rasped like dry kelp dragging over sand.

I didn't at all know what to say. I was sopping wet and cold, and slime wriggled between my toes. I almost missed the swaddling bandages in all that muck. The pier water rippled around my thin robe as I stood like a child attempting to recite a poem she has not even tried to memorize.

"Majo sent me." I shrugged, trying to look as though I conversed with otters every day. "I guess. I mean, I guess she sent me. She said to come to the pier, though it's very dirty and I think a great many things have died down here."

"No doubt," said the otter, finally popping the shell open and ripping a thick piece of abalone flesh from the shimmering shell. "And each more delicious than the last." It chewed hard for a good while on the tough meat before

speaking again. “Well, if Majo sent you, I suppose we’ll have to make ends meet with a scraggly, skinny little fox, won’t we? No worse than most. I am Rakko, King of the Otters. If you haven’t brought me any shrimp or clams or such as tribute, I’ll just notch it down as owed.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to bow in the brackish water, “I didn’t know you were a King. I certainly would have brought something.”

“Well,” he said, paddling past me to one of the rusted buckets and fishing something foul and greenish from its depths, nearly tipping the bobbing pail over in his enthusiasm, “mainly I’m King because I said I was, and nobody said any different. But this pier is as good as any throne room, and there are riches in every cage and pot. That’s how kings are made, my brush-tailed girl—they pick a place, shove a stick in it, call themselves King and wait to see if someone gets angry about it. No one has gotten angry so far, so that makes the otters mine.”

“I see.” I nodded, and wondered if this was entirely how the King of my own country began. “Well, I’m not sure what Majo means for me to do—”

“What are foxes good for? She means for you to steal something for me. It’s not an easy thing. I hope you’re up to the task—she sends me girls from time to time, but they are usually far too frail for thieving.”

I blushed a little, thinking of my tiny feet, hidden by the sea.

“What is it you want me to get for you?”

Rakko looked up out of the buckets, his furry face suddenly quiet and sad, water dripping off his long whiskers like rain from stalks of wheat. He rubbed at his round brown eyes as if he had not slept since the sea was a puddle, and the moon pulled at dry land. “It’s not for me”—he sighed—“not for me at all, but I need you to steal a Star…”



I REMEMBER THE SPLASH MOST OF ALL.

Sekka and I were diving—Sekka is the Queen of the Loons. She taught me the trick of saying you were Queen. But where I'm King-Under-the-Pier and even bratty girls don't bring me so much as an urchin as tribute, once Sekka said she was Queen, the other loons saw just how black her head was, how vast her wingspan—for poor Sekka was born larger than any other loon, and suffered a great deal for it when she was a chick—how white her belly, and how haunting was her wail and cry, and immediately agreed that she should certainly be Queen, and right away. Unfortunately, she found out that this is a pretty inferior way of becoming a ruler, because it usually means you have to add responsibilities into the bargain, and not simply many, many buckets of delicious rotted fish. Her nest is the thickest and best-thatched of all the seabirds, but she has to visit all the hens during mating season, and she tries very hard, but loons are heavy fliers at best, and she rarely makes the full rounds.

It was not mating season when the splash came. Loons and otters are alike in love of diving—we puff out all our air and make our stomachs quite flat, and swoop to the deep, cold currents where the fat fish fly. Sekka and I are the best divers you could imagine, should you spend your time imagining how gifted divers can be. We raced; we played; we fished. It was night, and thin blue light shafted through the water like anglers' hooks. The shadow of a passing ship flittered through the water overhead.

Just as I shot past her to pry up a clam from a deep rock, the whole sea lit up as though the moon had been dropped whole into the water. The currents flashed suddenly bone white, and I saw Sekka's shape flare purple against them, and my own tail was washed in it, and my eyes were burned. I rubbed at them furiously, and when I pulled my paws away the light was dimmed, and there was a small boy floating down from the surface, sinking terribly fast into the blue-black deeps.

We dove after him like one animal, our chests burning with air-need, dropping like two stones after the spiraling body. I do not know now, when I think back, why we thought it was so important to catch that near-dead thing before it slushed into the ocean floor, but without thinking, we would have drowned in the dive if it meant we could have stopped his fall. In the end, it was Sekka who caught him, snatching a lock of his hair in her dark beak. I stroked through the last inches of water to grip him around the waist, and we drew him up to the surface hanging between us like a net of salmon—and you know, he was so heavy, so heavy, I thought then he must have been filled with silver weights.

When our three heads broke through the waves, I pulled him up onto my belly like a scallop shell, and he lay there, limp, holding his head in his hands, as the night threw shadows on his skin. Finally, after a long silence which left Sekka and me fretting like new parents over him, he coughed, and spat water onto my fur. Moaning, he lifted his head, still clutched in his hands. I noticed two things right away: the first was that there was a thin line running all the way through his scalp and head, which oozed with a kind of wet darkness.

The second was that he had two faces where his ears should be, and nothing but smooth skin where I expected to look him in the eye. It was this skin which was split by the black line.

He held his head on either side, his hands covering his noses and foreheads, leaving his wet lips open, and stringy hair covered his hands. When he spoke, he used both mouths, in chorus with himself, one high, reedy voice, a child's, and one low and grave, a man's.

"I'm alive," he croaked.

"Matter of opinion, little drowned dear," clucked Sekka, who had already pecked at the black stuff on his faceless face and declared it horrid. It was not

exactly blood, but it was not exactly not-blood.

"Sekka," I said softly, "what do we do? Float him back to shore?"

She stretched out her long black wings to cover him, and the white spots on her feathers glittered like stars. "Little lost thing. Can you swim? Perhaps if you let go of your poor head—"

"No!" the boy cried, awkwardly shrinking from her and almost toppling into the water. Both his faces looked sheepish as he clung to me with his elbows. "No, I'm sorry, I can't. I can't let go, I mean."

"What happened to you?" Sekka prodded, nuzzling his ribs as she would a chick with a broken wing.

"I fell." He sighed.



I AM NOT LIKE THE OTHERS.

I wanted the world. Even after, even after, when they all went into the hills, into the ground, into the dark, when people opened up deep stone wells of forgetting in their bellies and all the Stars dove in, I stayed. No different from when I first took that step, that long step down from the black, I wanted the grass and the salt and the hard, round cheeses and the houses with tiled roofs and the beach with countless, countless sands. I was happy here; I didn't want to pull brambles over my head and pretend I heard nothing of the world going by.

So I touched everything, everything I could reach, to leech the light out of me, to bleed out enough that I could pass for a thing that had never been a hole in nothing. I touched men and women and children sleeping in tamarack cribs, I touched cups and plates and bushels of roses, I touched haywains and haystacks and the thick doors of prisons, I touched the grass and the salt and the hard, round cheeses, I touched houses with tiled roofs, and I let the countless sands run through my hands until my skin no longer glowed.

But my faces, you will say. Surely no one would mistake me for a man.

And I say that we all chose that which was most like us, and I could not decide. I looked at the grass and the salt and they were nothing like me. I looked at the hard, round cheeses. I looked at the tile-roofed houses and I looked at the countless sands of the beach. Nothing matched me like one shoe to another.

And then I saw children who had faces just alike, walking two by two, and these were twins; I knew that I also walked two by two, even though I had only one body. I split my face and became the Twinned Star, and though I would puddle out my light on the dry ground to fit in the cities of men, I would not change my nature. And why should I? The cities were always filled with monsters, and I could easily be mistaken for one of their number. I called myself Itto, and vanished into a noisy tangle of streets.

I lived, I ate, I worked, I walked two by two.

I watched the world forget what we looked like, and then pile up flowers on altars in our names. I shook my head.

I lived, I ate, I worked. I passed well for a monster, and men did not love me.

After a long while I took it into my head to try the ocean on my skin. I set out to build myself a ship, and bought a great quantity of wood in a seaside town—beautiful wood, like none I had ever seen, with a grain like veins filled with blood, deep red and glossy. I made a place for myself out of the way of the other shipwrights, who laughed when the freakish child came striding by, his arms full of their tools, and set to the keel with a hammer and his own callused hands.

It was not long before the shipwrights came to me and said: "Itto, that wood is too fine for your kind. By rights we should have it for our ships, for surely your stunted ship will be as misshapen and deformed as you, and spoil the wood."

I did not want them to take it, of course I didn't. But they held me back and gathered whatever of the red wood they liked. What could I do? We are not marvels; we do not have the strength of ten. When our light is spent, we are less, even, than a knot-faced, salt-shouldered shipwright.

When they had gone, I looked at what was left and said, "Very well, I cannot build a ship. I will build a canoe."

It was not long before the shipwrights came again and said: "Itto, that wood is too fine for your kind. By rights we should have it for our ships, for surely your crook-beamed canoe will be as misshapen and deformed as you, and spoil the wood."

I did not want them to take it, of course I didn't. But they held me back and gathered whatever of the red wood they liked. What could I do? I had spent

myself on the grass and the salt—I could not blight a man with a glance.

When they had gone, I looked at what was left and said, "Very well, I cannot build a canoe. I will build a raft."

There was hardly enough wood left even to make a raft, but I lashed plank to plank, pole to pole, splinter to splinter. Before long I had a red raft, and it was sturdy and small, and I loved it. It was my own thing, a thing I made as the sky made me, and no less dear to me than if it had been a child.

It bore me on the purple waves as surely as a hermit bears his pack. I fished well from its edge, and my shirt was a poor man's sail. It filled; my nets filled. I lay on the rough surface of the red wood and smelled its fibers, like blood and cinnamon prickling my nose. I spoke to it, and I thought, lonely as I was, that it answered, and its voice was smooth and dark as the sky. It pressed up under my back at night, and the dark washed both my faces with gentle hands.

When I returned to the city, I kept it folded away in long, oiled cloths, stained with fish skins, certainly, but as soft as I could afford. It leaned up against the meanest wall in the smallest boathouse on the docks. And one day, when I came to unwrap my raft and put out into the shallows, there was nothing leaning against the mean wall but filthy, stained cloths and a single broken plank of scarlet wood.

As I stood trying not to weep, a voice came from behind me. I turned—it was the scraggly, lanky son of one of the other shipwrights. He shoved greasy hair out of his eyes, which darted like a guilty dog's between me and what was once a raft. "Itto," he whispered, licking his lips, "that wood was too fine for you."

He ran from the boathouse, leaving me to the remains.

I carried the broken plank away from the countless sands of the beach, away from any house with a tiled roof, away from the makers of round, hard cheeses, over the grass and past any place which salted its meat. Finally, I reached a forest wide of branch and root, and in the center of the forest I found a patch of deep earth, where I buried the shard of glossy red wood just as I would a child of my body. I wept into the grave, as bitterly as I have done any thing since I took my step down out of the sky.

I did not know what else to do; I returned to the city, to my wretched, shingle-shack home. The lanky boy was waiting for me. As if in apology,

shuffling his feet and picking at his pimples, he offered me a place on his father's ship. "If you want to sail, it is easier to serve on another man's ship than to build your own, you know," he said, as if he knew everything that could be known about the matter.

My raft was gone. One set of planks was like another. I went aboard the ship, and for weeks washed the sickly brown boards as they told me, stitched the thick sails as they told me, slopped tar in broad barrels as they told me.

And then one night, the shipwright's son sunk an oar in my head.



"I SUPPOSE HE WANTED TO MAKE HIS FATHER proud," the boy groaned, leaning heavily on my taut stomach. Truthfully, my back was beginning to ache from balancing him above the waterline, but it behooves a King to be patient. "I did the natural thing—my hands flew up to my head, while pain thrashed in me like a raft in a storm, and when he drew out the oar, I held myself together, somehow. The boy saw it, he saw that I still spoke, and staggered, and that what came out of me was not exactly like blood, and with his stringy arms he threw me over the side, my hands still clutching my head together like two halves of a cut peach and what light was left in me blanched the sea." Itto turned up awkwardly, to look at Sekka with his left eyes. "But you see, if I let go I am sure I will perish, and I am afraid. So few of us have ever died. I am afraid."

I didn't know what to say. We floated there like pieces of a shipwreck, and the moon moved on his frail back.

"Where do you want us to take you? I'm afraid you wouldn't like my pier very much."

Sekka was very quiet. Her huge black eyes were fixed on the bedraggled boy. "You want to go back. Up there."

"I don't know," he answered, but his voice hitched itself into a half-sob. "I couldn't get back, even if I did. I let all my light out, or most of it, and I'm so weak, I can hardly heave myself off an otter's belly. But I'm afraid. I don't know what's up there, if that's where the dead go, if I can go back without dying. I

don't know anything. But it doesn't matter; I can't get there any more than a mouse can get up a mountain."

Sekka fluffed her feathers lightly, making her look even bigger than usual. "Would a mountain do?" She turned her head to one side, like a rooster in the morning.

Itto took a long time answering. I felt his breath on me, light and fast, a little wing fluttering against my fur.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe it would."

The Tale of the Good Trick, Continued

RAKKO RAN HIS THICK PAWS OVER HIS BELLY AS IF in memory.

"Well, what happened?" I cried eagerly.

"Sekka took him up to the mountain, long years ago, and she can't bring him back. He won't come down. Poor Sekka circles the mountain and cries her long cries, but he doesn't hear. I want you to bring him back for me, and for her, like a good little fox. Steal him from himself. Drag him. Throw him over your shoulder." The King of the Otters frowned. "He shouldn't be there all alone. I'll share my buckets and my nets. Sekka would cover him with her wings for the rest of her days and let the nesting be damned. He doesn't have to be up there alone."

"And how am I supposed to get to the top of a mountain? I'm a fox, and I've only just discovered that much. I'm not an eagle."

From behind one of the paint-stripped pillars, a huge bird emerged, with clear black eyes and white spots on her wings. She was just big enough, I supposed, to carry a child on her back.



“He told Sekka where he buried his raft, you know. If you bring him down, she’ll tell you.”

“Why would I care where he stuck an old piece of wood?”

The loon Queen glided up to me. “You ask too many questions,” she said with a sigh. Her voice was low and sad, softer than the loon wails I had heard when the black-and-white birds gathered in my mother’s pond. I looked back over my shoulder at the long pale strand of beach, and the dark shape of Majo and her house-hunch surrounded by tall grass. She looked quite asleep.

Without another question, I climbed onto Sekka’s broad back, and put my arms around her slim neck. Her feathers smelled like scallop shells, and seaweed, and eggshells. She lifted us both up into the night.



"Do you need food?" Sigrid suddenly said, as though it had only just occurred to her that folk occasion ally eat.

"I am a little hungry."

The woman heaved her bulk onto her feet and disappeared inside the ship-tower. I was left in the last glow of the sun, the scent of the not-too-distant market in my nose: saffron and roasting meat and sour silk-dyes, sweat and barrels of still oil and molten metal poured into molds. Al-a-Nur was warm, and alive, and there was no snow or lichen or ice anywhere.

Sigrid reemerged with a wooden tray and dropped it unceremoniously at my feet. On it were a few brown squares, a single strip of desiccated meat, an iron flask, and an orange. "Hard tack, jerked vole, rum, and a bit of fruit to keep your teeth in your head. If you enter the Sainthood, it's all you'll have to eat for your first year, so learn to like it." A lopsided smile crossed her creased brown face like a pale page turning in a beaten book. "For me, it still tastes as good as wine in crystal and doves stuffed with blackberries. The best stuff there is."

I ate politely. It was hard and crumbly and tasteless as a shingle. The meat was like a solid strip of salt, and the rum bitter as fox bile. The orange alone was sweet and golden.

"So you believe in the Stars?" I asked tentatively.

She shrugged, like a mountain settling its boulders. "The Stars are here and there, whether we believe in them or not. I could believe in you or declare to

all passersby that you are a lie and a silly story, but it wouldn't change the fact that you're sitting here, you mark the grass, you ate my food, you take up space. But the Stars don't act. They give us no model for living. They teach us nothing. The first Sigrids looked for more than that. But that's putting the stern before the bow. We're hardly at the beginning of Saint Sigrid, but nearing the end of Tomomo…"



Beneath me, the Queen of the Loons was warm. Above me, the night was cold as dead hands, and those hands pulled at me, at my thin nightrobe and my bare, unbound feet. I buried my face in her feathers.

"He doesn't even speak anymore," she crooned, and clouds whisked across her beak. "He just sits up there in the frost and stares. I don't think you can do much, but I have hope. He's heavy, so if you have to carry him, it'll be tough going."

"Did he speak much in the beginning?"

Sekka lowered her dark head. Her webbed feet opened and closed beneath her. "We talked all the way to the top of the mountain. Sweet things and soft things and sighing and whispering, and stories of the dark at the beginning of the world, stories of the eggs at the beginning of the season. Rakko doesn't listen too well—except when I told him how to be King—but Itto listened, and I didn't have to tell him any tricks just to get him to stop interrupting me like a fur-brained fool. And after I left him in the cold at the roof of the world, I used to fly back up when the drakes stopped squalling for mates, and then we'd sigh sweetly and whisper softly again, and tell stories about the dark and the eggs. But after a few seasons, I was the only one talking, and nothing about him was sweet or soft anymore. Now he sits on the rocks and there's nothing but him holding his head together and looking at the black. I haven't been back since the last girl Majo brought, who gave up after only an hour."

"I won't give up," I whispered, soft and sweet.

I cannot say how long it took to reach the top of the mountain, though it seemed that some number of suns rose and set on my wind-whipped skin. At the peak, though, it was always night, as dark as the belly of a blackbird. And Sekka set me down in that endless murk, on the craggy summit. The summit of a mountain is smaller than you think, and there was hardly enough room for me and Itto—for there he was, knees drawn up to his chest, hands pressing two faces towards each other—to sit side by side. Sekka roosted on a lower rock and waited for me to fail.

"Hello," I said, for lack of a better word.

The Star said nothing.

"I've come to get you down from here, away from here. It's cold as still blood, and your Sekka wants you."

The Star said nothing.

Well, she had said he wouldn't. So I pulled at his limbs and tried to put him over my shoulder—I was skinny, but so was he, and not much larger than I was. I was sure I'd be able to do it. A fox carries a kit in her mouth, doesn't she? But he was much heavier than he seemed, like a sack of iron slugs, and I could not budge him, no matter how I pushed and pulled.

The Star said nothing.

So I said nothing. I sat and looked where he was looking. It was a long expanse of black, marked with seven stars all in a tight cluster, leaning one against the other. It was very boring.

"I can do a trick; would you like to see?"

The Star said nothing, but his right eyes flickered a little. I gathered a lump of snow from the gray rock of the summit and warmed it in my hands till it became water. I held it out between us, and, leaning over the little pool in my palms, I showed him my fox face with its creamy tufts of fur at the ears, and smart black nose.

He laughed a little, a sound like water trickling off of high stones. "That's a good trick," he said, his throats hoarse from cold and silence, and he did speak, just as the otter said, in unison with himself, one voice high and one low.

"I've only just learned it," I confessed, "and now that you're speaking, won't you please come off the mountain?"

"There isn't a good enough trick played by the best of all tricksters to make me do that." He sighed. "I'm holding vigil, and a vigil doesn't vanish because one's toes are frozen blue."

"Why are you holding vigil?"

"Do you see those seven stars there?" he asked. I did, of course—there was little enough to look at but those glittering specks. "You might say those are my cousins. Of course, you might not." He coughed and rubbed at his four temples with his fingers. "I came up here because I was afraid. I was afraid to let go of my head, afraid to die, even though I should be dead. I came up here to see if the seven stars in the sky were my cousins, who died so long ago I hardly remember what they looked like, safe home and no worse for death. If they were, if they were safe as rabbits in a hutch, then I wouldn't be afraid, then I could let go of my head and drift up. This is the roof of the world, and you can almost touch the tiles. I wouldn't have so far to go."

He looked at my still-wet hands, just beginning to frost over, and I think if he could have he would have taken them in his. I reached up, as I imagined he wanted me to, I reached up on my toes to touch the sky—and I did touch it, I did; my fingers pressed into the black and oh, it felt like flesh! It felt like skin and a soft, glistening leg or belly behind the skin, and a diamond bone behind that. I could not guess whose skin it might be, but it was warm under my chilled fingertips, so warm. And when I touched it I saw the seven stars as he must have, and they were nothing like stars at all, but just seven troughs dug in the sky, pale as sea-bleached bones.

"They're graves," he whispered, "nothing but graves, and their light is nothing but a headstone, and they are not there, not there at all, the sky is a tomb and I cannot die, because I am still so afraid. Where do we go if not here? I am so afraid, and so alone, and all I have ever loved is a pathetic broken raft, and it is all that has ever loved me."

Itto was weeping then, great hot tears from each of his four eyes, and they froze on his cheeks as they fell.

I crouched on my knees before the Star and took his huge, misshapen head into my hands. I stroked his brittle, snow-crusted hair and pressed my face to his. I said nothing; I crooned like a bird, or how I thought a bird would sound,

and I held him for a very long while. I did not know how to get him down, but I supposed that I did, in the end, know how to steal him from himself.

I wrapped my numbed fingers around his wrists and began to pry his hands from his faces. He stiffened and shrunk away. "No!" he gasped. "I can't!"

"It's all right," I said, and I said it over and over. "It's all right. You're hurting your Sekka, who loves you like a raft, and would rather see you snug under the forest loam, safe and no worse for death, than alone on a crag feeling sorry for yourself. It's all right, I'm here, and I know you're too afraid to do it, but I'll help you."

His lips were dry against my arms as I pulled at his hands. "But couldn't I stay like this, forever, in the freeze?" His doubled voice was plaintive as a child asking for a sweet and a man asking for a sweetheart—but he answered himself. "No, I am tired, so tired, and my arms ache from holding myself to myself."

"I know a good trick, Itto," I whispered, "a very good trick."

He turned his head so that one of his faces could see me, his great dark eyes sweet and soft. I kissed him, very lightly, on each face and his lips under mine were cracked and torn as old paper. It was my first kiss, and my second, and they tasted of snow.

He went slack, and let me pull his hands from his head. I folded them in his lap. He stayed whole for a moment, and then his head opened into two halves, like an iris opening in the sunlight. Black fluid poured out of him, cold and ugly, over my hands and my robe, lumpish, dead stuff which had no scent at all. His body slumped forward onto me, and finally, after I had been soaked in his blood which was not exactly blood, two tiny silver drops of light squeezed out from the center of him, falling onto my hand like tears. I closed my fingers over them.

Sekka turned her head away when she saw my dress spattered black. She sent up a long, low cry, that strange loon-cry that makes the moon weep. She took me again on her back, and though she sang her funeral dirge to every passing cloud for all the days and nights it took to descend from the tiled roof of the

world, there was a kind of happiness in it, a relief, sweet and soft in the lowest notes of her song.

And I must have done well, for she told me where the raft was buried just before we landed softly by Majo's snoring form, her house-pack creaking in time to her grunts and snorts. She woke with a start and saw my fluid-stained dress clinging to my thighs, and nodded as if it was all no more than she expected. And Sekka left us, tottering down the beachhead to the long and lonely pier.

But I did not go to the forest that morning, or the next. I stayed with Majo, and nearly forgot about the plank of wood planted in the earth. I aged slowly, but when I asked, she only shrugged, grunting that each creature lives out its natural term. I learned much—though I was always hopeless with magic. I could no more fashion a charm than a horse could knit its own saddle blanket. My talent was in the hunt and the chase, and in the kill. These things Majo taught me with pleasure, and my skill grew great. I had too much fox in me, she would say sadly over countless night fires. I could perform only fox magic, which was ever the magic of stalking, invisible in the shadows, and the snatching of prey from the air. The truth is that there are many kinds of magic, and her kind, the magic of precisely ground herbs and charms bound at the right phase of the moon, lay in the human half, not the animal. What use a fox's paws in the lashing of seven-knotted spells? It knows only the magic of hot blood and swift fur—and these are powerful, so powerful they need no little satchel of leaves to help them along. But the fox is not overfond of tools.

"We can be certain," she would cackle, "that you would have been a most dull and tedious woman. It is the fox that saves you from total idiocy."

But it was clear that Majo was not the guardian of my destiny. I wanted her to be; I wanted to be a good Witch and carry her cart for her over silver fields and slushing marshes in the early morning light. But I could never accomplish more than a simple tincture or poultice for a slashed ear. In her eyes I saw the truth: We would soon part. She would find a better student, and I would find a life that contained no carts or eager women begging for love spells.

The day we parted she showed no more emotion than the day we met; she was bemused, proud of herself, conspiratorial. She took me walking as we often did, and the sun was crisp as apple skin on my back. It was not long before we reached the edge of a forest, the very forest I had told her Sekka said contained the buried plank. I had forgotten, like the summer forgets the snow. Majo grinned. "You were always an absentminded girl. Try to work on that."

She tapped my right hand with her finger and I opened it—lying on my palm were the two drops of silver light, shining like tears, which had long ago seeped into my skin and disappeared. I looked up at her, wonder written as plainly on my face as a tattoo. She gripped my hand in her withered old claws and tipped the palm so that the tears fell onto the earth, and then embraced me, I knew for the last time, as a kit always knows when it is time for her to catch mice by herself and not trouble the vixen any longer.

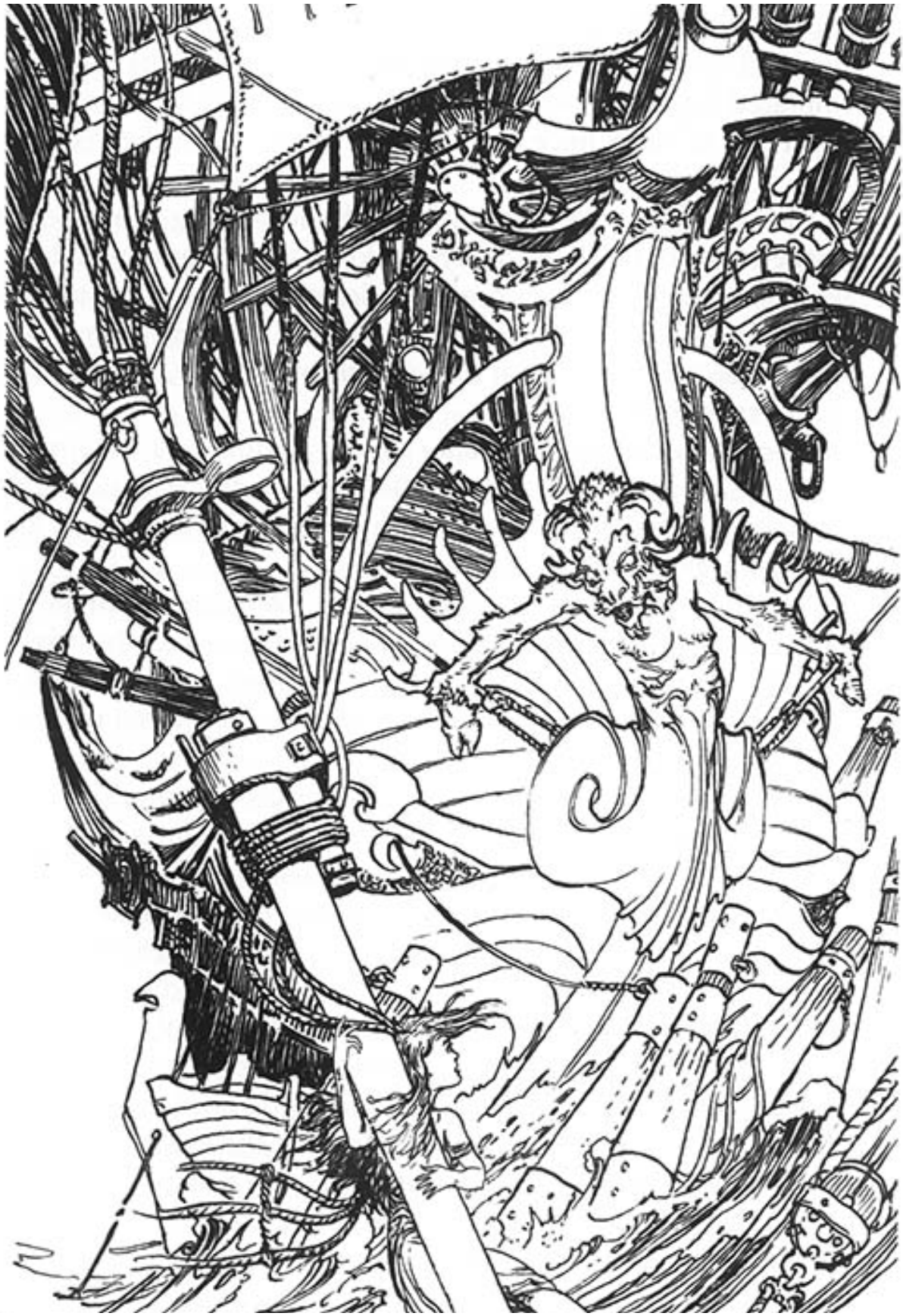
The two tears wet the rust-red soil beneath me, pooling there like rain in a cottage gutter. But they did not seep into the ground as they had once disappeared into my skin—they began to trickle away from me, faster and faster. I held Majo tightly for a moment, tears clouding my last vision of her face like the trunk of a great tree, and then, eyes dry, I chased after them with a cry of excitement.

I looked over my shoulder only once as I ran—and soon I was running as fast as I could go—to see Majo trundling away with her house on her back like some ridiculous turtle, and it seemed to me that there was a kind of light at her heels, silver as the old woman's hair.

But the twin tracks of salt tears were swiftly disappearing into the distance, and perhaps it was only a trick of the sun. I rushed after them for almost an hour, ducking under bough, leaping over root. It was a marvelous hunt. Finally, they stopped and parted, each streaming around the trunk of an extraordinary tree.

At first, I did not even realize it *was* a tree. The drops of Itto's light had grown as they flowed on, until they surrounded it as a knee-deep moat, rippling in the dim light. A tree rose out of that water which was not water, yet it was not a tree, either, but a menagerie of ship-shards, twisted together into the shape of a trunk, of branches, of roots arching into the moat of tears. Prows jutted angrily from the base, masts and keels winding around each

other, chasing rudders and booms of colorful wood, ruddy and golden. An enormous oaken forecastle hung from one side of the tree, while smooth wheels spun lazily in the wind on high and low. There were only a few dusky green leaves hanging from the branches; instead, they were hung with lines and rigging, and sails half tangled in the crows' nests that served as the topmost boughs. Lazy breezes filled them and left them sagging as they liked. The forest was filled with the sound of billowing sails and creaking wood. In the center of the trunk was a figurehead whose paint had been faded by sun and salt: a sea-goat with a curling tail and furry breasts, a wisp of a beard at her chin, her arms braced against the jumble of tree and ship, her large eyes cast heavenward, mouth agape.





The wood of the tree was a deep, glossy red, the grain of it like veins filled with blood.

As I gawked at the spectacle of the Ship-Tree, her eyes rolled slowly down from the sky, like a stone rolling across the mouth of a cave, and her jaw unlocked to speak.

"Is that you?" she said softly, her voice rustling like leaves, or sails.

"No," I said, "I don't think it is."

"Oh." The tree sighed. "It never is. I'm used to it by now. When I was a sapling I was sure he'd come any day. Is that… is that *seawater*?" she gasped, her timber-flanked body quivering with surprise. "The real thing? From a port full of drunkards and thieves and shipwrights' sons? Drawn from a pier full of crab fishermen with nets like giants' bracelets? Oh, is it?"

"No," I answered, "it's the last thing the Star left behind him: blood which is not blood, light which is not light, water which is not water."

The masthead's face became as soft as wood can manage, and tears of sap flowed down her face. She spoke to the moat around her.

"Itto? Itto? Do you see how big and tall I've become? I'm a real ship now, not a silly broken raft. Aren't you proud of me?"

I thought, then, that I had done what I came to do, and that no one who knew the Star could have asked more. I turned to leave the Ship-Tree alone with the tears.

"Oh, please, oh, please wait!" The figurehead writhed towards me, and it seemed at any moment she would twist right off the tree and tumble into my arms. But the Ship-Tree moved with her, and the sound of creaking grew even louder, accompanied by the rusted squeaking of the hanging rigging. I climbed up a little onto a keel-root.

"I'm here."

She blushed, her red wood becoming even darker and more crimson. "Thank you for the water," she said.

“I would like to give you something too, even though you never rode me through the dark water—I would have done it for him, but I can still do it for you, I can bear fruit for you, just like all the other trees.”

I was immediately unsure. “What sort of fruit do you have, Ship?”

She smiled, her bright cheeks quivering with barely held tears. “It’s my present to you: the best dream of a lonely raft, everything I ever wanted to be when I slept wrapped in oilskin.”

The Ship-Tree seemed to bulge, and its groans vibrated through the forest. The sails twisted together, the rigging knotted itself into half-hitches and bowlines, the keels and prows clattered together like branches tapping against a window. The figurehead kept laughing, louder and more shrilly until I felt my ears would burst from the sound. The creaking and cracking of wood was like a storm rolling across the wood, and all the while, the moat of tears was spreading and growing deeper, until I was trying desperately to swim as little waves sloshed over my chin. The tree was so large then that I feared it would engulf me entire, if I did not drown first.

But I did neither. From the topmost branches of the Ship-Tree, a thing began to take shape. A prow, a mast, a jib, then a hull, a keel. A bright wheel spun into being like a sunflower opening. A ship, full-grown, descended from the branches like an apple falling, and came to rest comfortably on the now swift-flowing river of tears. The figurehead quieted herself, and drew one of her huge wooden hooves from the side of the trunk, scooping me out of the still-rising water by the scruff of the neck.

“Don’t wreck her too quickly,” the figurehead said worriedly, and set me down at the new ship’s wheel.

When my feet touched the newborn wood of the decks, I felt suddenly at home. It was not a question of which line to pull taut or which sail to trim; the sleek schooner was as familiar to me as my own limbs. The ship was mine, made for my hand as surely as a child of my own womb.

And the river of tears, now deeper than the fruit-ship’s keel, moved gently away from the tree which was once a raft, flowing ahead of itself, carrying me along the forest floor in silence, save for soft ripples against the hull, like a child kissing her mother’s cheek.

And slowly, ever so slowly, it bore me past the edge of the wood, down through ripe fields of wheat, over grass and salt and the huts of the makers of hard, round cheeses, past houses with tiled roofs and the countless grains of sand on a pale beach, past a long, lonely pier and into the sea.



TOMOMO LICKED HER LIPS, THE FOX REFLECTION flicked its pink tongue over its muzzle.

"And that was how the *Maidenhead* was born. I named her for a thing I had long lost, and sailed her true. Who would have thought a fox could grow sea legs? As soon as I had mastered her I glided into the nearest port and took on sailors. At first it was not that I asked for women, or for monsters, to serve. But the men would not sail under a female captain, and women without our… unusual histories were clamped into their houses like fireflies in a glass jar, and had understandably never learned any seacraft. Thus the *Maidenhead,* with all her strangeness, became even stranger, and more wonderful. We are happy, we are free—you can be, too."

Sigrid nodded, her eyes lit with joy like beacons on high hills. She had never imagined her life would be filled with anything but the measuring of cinnamon dust and the keeping of her father's books. At that moment, her heart belonged to the black-haired Tomomo, and there was nothing she would not have done, if her captain had asked it.

Being the captain she was, Tomomo knew this; she knew the light in Sigrid's eyes, she knew the eagerness of her posture. Many a girl before her had been enchanted thus, and not for the first time Tomomo thought that the magic of the hunt was not limited to the chasing of mice across a rain-wet field.

"Since you know nothing of ships yet, barge daughter, you will have to make yourself useful in other ways until you have learned. Go below: find a Satyr

with green rings on her fingers—she will introduce you to our passengers, and you will see to their needs for the night."

"Yes, Tomomo—I mean, Tommy!" Sigrid smiled, a smile which had never before touched her face, the deepest smile, which comes from the belly, and gleams with its own flickering light. She turned and instinctively ran towards the door which led into the innards of the scarlet ship, letting the door bang closed behind her with a merry clang.

In the Garden

"I MUST GO," THE BOY WHISPERED, HIS HANDS ALREADY ILLUMINATED BY the blue-gold light weaving its way through the sky as the night died away from them. The girl said nothing. She stared at her hands as though she might read there some arcane method of freezing the sun in its ascent.

"Will you be here when I return?" The boy was sure she would not be, whatever she might answer. She had slipped from him, somehow, like a veil sweeping over his hands. When she had sat on his windowsill and told him of the death of the wicked King, and the flight of the bird-maiden seeking her cave, he had been able to touch her, to rest his head on her lap, to feel her warmth like a sparrow's wing in the sun. Now, she seemed thin, transparent, and he feared that if he reached out his hand to her it would pass through her skin as though through a waterfall. All he could think was that he would steal her any feast, any cloak of feathers or fur, any flask of wine or even the jewels from Dinarzad's fingers if she would only smile at him again, the way she had done that night, like the sun breaking over the first sea of the world.

He frowned at her, picking at a clump of dirt with his civilized hands.

"Meet me on the cypress path, where the stones are painted red. I will be there, I promise."

And then she did smile, soft and wide as a river trickling through a secret wood.

He had not set down his second foot past the arching gate when Dinarzad's voice cut cleanly through him like a hot knife in his stomach.

"Why do you insist on hurting me this way?" Her tone was petulant, sorrowing, but he knew the danger in it.

"Sister," the boy began, "she is not what you think—"

"I do not care what she is! She has not broken the rules of her house—she does not have a house to disobey! It is you who have defied me and the Sultan, who have kept the wives in a constant panic, like birds chasing after seed!"

Of course they had done no such thing. The harem was massive, so huge that the comings and goings of the many children were largely unnoticed. How could he be so special as to be missed by anyone save Dinarzad, who hated him so? The wives were desultory and sage, lounging in their halls like lionesses, occasionally swatting an errant cub. The army of tutors and guards and older sisters on the brink of marriage kept the brood in check, and it must be they who marked the boy's nightly absence.

"What are you doing out there with her? You must know you are of an age where it is more than unseemly to be alone with an unmarried girl all night. Why can you not behave as you ought to, as a noble son ought to? How can it be worth all of this just to sit with another child under the stars?"

The boy saw his chance to make her understand. But when he tried to tell the girl's story and make her see how his heart strained towards the Garden like a horse who senses home is near, it became jumbled in his mouth. No matter how he tried, he could not make it beautiful, he could not tell the same tale that the girl unspooled from her eyes like strange, black thread.

"Dinarzad, let me tell you a story. Once there was a girl that no one loved, and she was called Snow. She lived in a town by the sea, and one day another woman, who I think was very fat, made friends with her by giving her an orange because both of them worked mending nets and Snow came from the South where there were lots of oranges. Or—yes, I think that's right. The woman, who was named Sigrid—that's important, you know—told Snow a story about how three men with the heads of dogs took her away to a holy city and then the dog-men told her a story about a terrible lady called the Black Papess, who could drive men mad just by kissing them. And the Papess kissed the dog-headed men and made them eat their brother—"

“Have you gone mad, child? Has she cast some spell over you and softened your brain like an apple in the rain? I will hear no more of this.”

The boy protested, but Dinarzad would not listen. She seized him by the hair and dragged him across the courtyard under the sunshine of the new day, clean and bright as washed linen. He did not cry—at least he told himself that he was not crying, though tears streamed silently down his cheeks. His sister’s fingers were very thin, and curled like the claws of a starving hawk. She hauled him behind her and into the stables, which stunk of horse sweat and dung, depositing him at the feet of an old man with greasy hair and enormous hands. All the boy could see of him were the huge hands, knuckled like the roots of an elm, laced together at the level of his eyes into one massive fist.

“Treat him no better than one of the mute slaves, and if he escapes in the night you will both be whipped,” announced Dinarzad curtly. She turned on one flawless heel and left the stable in a flurry of violet silk and black braids.

The boy stood and brushed himself clean of the bits of hay that stuck to the floor and now his shirt. He was careful to look as contrite as he could, though of course he was already planning to slip out as soon as the old man was in his cups that evening. He could see the man’s face now, which was lumpish and ugly, but not very frightening, more of the gnome than the ogre about him.

“That one’s a she-dragon and no doubt about it,” the blacksmith grunted, cracking his huge knuckles with a sound like the breaking of stone pots. “Firstborns are always trouble. Ask me, they should expose the first brats out of the Sultan’s women just to be safe. If not for what’s between her legs, she’d have been Sultan herself—no doubt that’s why you trouble her so.”

“But I’m not to be Sultan,” the boy protested. “There must be dozens of sons ahead of me! If I were the heir, they’d have told me by now! I certainly wouldn’t be allowed to run around the Garden—or put to work in the stables!”

“Look who knows so much!” the old man chortled. “The servants always know ten times what the master guesses. Mark me, boy—you shoe the horse today that you’ll ride tomorrow.”

The boy stared, nonplussed. He might have explained further that it was perfectly impossible for him to be anything but a minor courtier, but the old man had begun to pile equipment into his arms—a curry-comb, hammers of varying sizes, horseshoes, new nails, hooked tools he could not possibly name.

"We'll start with the black one on the end, eh? He's not too out of sorts in the morning—some of the others like their beauty rest." The boy began to follow obediently, struggling to contain the tools in his small arms, but the blacksmith turned back and gazed through his cloudy eyes at the boy.

"When the sun's down, you can find your way out to the Garden through the sorrel's stall. There's a loose board and a little crawling passage. If you just manage to come back before dawn, she might not catch you. Take the girl some of my lunch—I don't eat much these days and she's a growing thing."

The boy, stunned, nodded and ducked into the great black gelding's stall, dropping several nails.

He found, to his surprise, that he liked working with the horses. Most were patient as parishioners, lifting their hooves in a bored manner and nosing his chest for apples. He liked their smell, their big barrel ribs, their sloping heads, the softness of their throats. He liked their blustering noises and their quiet company. He felt, truly, like one of the Witch Knife's tribe, tending his horses on the steppes, preparing for a raid on an offending village. That tale seemed so long past, now, but he immersed himself in it again, and passed the hours in a merry haze.

When the sun's rays had grown long and red as ruby tongues, he bundled up the food the blacksmith had left and started off through the door at the far end of the black-eyed sorrel's stall. He felt a little foolish—of course all the servants would know about the girl. What scandal passed under the many roofs of a Palace that some servant did not know it and tell it to another? They might even feel badly for her and wish to take her in as their own daughter, raise her to bake bread and sew gowns, but could not for fear of the Sultan or the girl's parents, whichever of the diamond-strewn nobles they might be. All the same, he had begun to think of her as his, his secret, his own friend who belonged to no one else. He was almost sorry that she had friends among the cooks and blacksmiths.

Cursing such ungenerous thoughts, he searched out the cypress path, where the thick green trees pointed skyward like minarets reaching up to the first twinkling stars. The path was a complicated mosaic commissioned when he

was no more than a baby—the pebbles were arranged in every color imaginable, illustrating a scene from one of the Sultan's great victories. He found the place where it was red for several steps together—the blood of an unfortunate barbarian—and saw that the girl had already arrived, leaning on a cypress as though she had waited for hours.

"I meant to bring you better, but my sister gave me to a blacksmith and I could not get to the kitchens." He held out the horse-keeper's thick crust of bread and yellow cheese, and a fat peach.

"You don't have to bring me anything at all, you know. You don't have to supper for your song." She laughed at her own awkward joke, a high, startled sound like a spooked horse.

The boy shrugged and set out their small supper on a square of linen in the midst of the scarlet pebbles. "Of course, you might be high above me in rank, in which case I'd have to serve you; it would be my duty. I've no idea which of the men at court is your father—no one will admit to it. They talk as if you sprang into being out of the air like a Djinn! You might even be my sister! The Sultan has many wives, after all—"

The girl laughed. It was a hard laugh, like the edge of a plate rolling over a stone floor. "I am not your sister." The boy was a little abashed.

"I just like to bring you things, that's all."

"You like to hear my stories, and supper is their price. A noble boy cannot think of anything but cost."

The boy started as though she had struck him. "Are you so angry that you cut me because your eyes are dark and mine are not, because I sleep in a house and you in a bower?"

Her eyes softened immediately, chagrined, and the dark shadows of her lids seemed to glow silver and black, like the shapes of fish underwater. She put her arms around his slim neck, and for the first time, embraced the boy. His breath caught, and they stood awkwardly for a moment in the sea of red pebbles.

"I'm not angry, I'm not. I am sorry. Let me tell you what Sigrid found below the decks of the pirate ship…"



SIGRID DUCKED AND STEPPED GINGERLY ONTO THE first stair leading to the innards of the *Maidenhead*. The interior was dark as a belly, dusty and filled with strange noises—the knocking and creaking of a ship which Sigrid had not yet come to know as her own heartbeat. Suddenly, a face appeared out of the dark swirl of dust motes—wide and open, with a huge flaring nose and great green eyes the color of a deep-thatched forest. All around the grinning face were tight curls of deep brown hair, almost as tightly curled as the fleece of a sheep or the fur of a wild dog. The shaggy mane fell long past the chin, and Sigrid peered closer to see the body attached to the face floating before her like a lantern.

"Hullo!" it cried, and pulled Sigrid down into the ship by her forearm. She saw that the face belonged to the woman she had been sent to find—the curly hair bunched and knotted all the way to her waist, where she ceased to be a woman and became a strange goatlike creature. Her haunches were thickly furred in brown and red, tapering to delicate hooves that had clearly been polished to their current bronze shine. She kicked them against the floorboards for good measure.

"Satyr! Yew copse, to be specific—but then that won't mean a thing to you. Welcome, little one! You've nothing to fear now. Eshkol's got you clamped to her side and Tommy's at the wheel. You're safe as a vault! Now, you must make yourself useful and earn your board and at the moment you're use*less* at

anything the least bit nautical—so you and I are going to play nursemaid to our pigheaded passengers!"

Sigrid went along amiably, admiring Eshkol's hooves. Indeed, they were shiny as mirrors, copper-colored and clearly strong as a mule's kick.

"I admit I shine 'em up every morning," Eshkol said with a laugh, "but at sea you tend to cling to little vanities. Besides, I can still kick a hole in solid silver with the blessed things! Now, the thing you must remember about passengers, paying or otherwise, is that they think they own the ship. They fret about this or that and snipe at us about the rigging, or the sail material, or the type of wood in the mast. Best to humor them if they're paying, best to show them the plank if they aren't." The shaggy woman stopped and turned quickly to her charge. "Not that we have a plank, you understand! We just keep a good solid board below and tell folks it's a plank to scare them into giving us some peace! If we wanted to kill them, we'd be proper about it and put a blade in their guts like any civilized crew."

Eshkol led Sigrid through an astonishing labyrinth of rooms and stairs—so intricate that Sigrid could hardly believe they could still be on the *Maidenhead*. Finally, they arrived at a heavy wooden door from which issued the unmistakable sounds of a hearty dinner in progress.

"Part of the fun of it, you know," Eshkol explained. "The *Maid*'s a bit bigger belowdecks than above. I don't ask questions about that—I'm not a shipwright, it's none of mine. Now, these are the ones directing our prow for the season—Arimaspians. They're a bit frightening to look at and Lord knows I told Tommy it's bad luck to have a man aboard, but they pay in gold and they keep to themselves, and that's the best you can hope for from anyone. Now take this beer in and mind their needs and I'll see you in the evening—you'll bunk with me in the stern."

Eshkol disappeared as suddenly as she had arrived, and Sigrid was left face-to-face with the thick door, a clay pitcher of frothing black beer in her hand. She did not quite fancy being a serving wench to whatever monsters lay on the other side, but she hoped that it would only be for the night, that in the morning Tommy would assign her to sew sails or some other thing which befitted a sailor. She slipped into the room and stood dumbly at the threshold, staring at the inhabitants.

At her entrance, six or so of them had scurried behind a seventh, clearly their leader. He was enormous as a bull elephant, shoulders and chest straining with muscle, and black—not the ruddy brown of Sigrid's own people, but true black, the color of midnight and lightless rooms, as though he had been cut from a block of onyx. His hair was braided in complicated patterns and threaded with gold, falling down his back like a woman's. His eye cut into her, no less black than his body—but he had only one true eye. The other was an eye fashioned out of gold and set into his skull like a diamond into a ring. It was a perfect likeness; one almost expected it to blink. She could see that his companions also had but one eye each, though their artificial eyes were not of gold, but of silver and bronze and copper and crystal. Sigrid felt reasonably certain of her guess and curtsied before the mountainous man as she would before a King.

"I am Oluwakim, King of the Arimaspian Oculos. Who is this insect who presents me with drink as if she were fit to serve me?"

"I… I am Sigrid, my lord. Of Ajanabh."

The King looked skeptically at her, his eye roving over her slight form like a hawk surveying the geography of a mouse's haunch.

"Are you human? You look like a human, girl. I will not be served by humans."

Sigrid stared determinedly at her feet. "I'm not entirely sure, sire. I see what you see when I look into the mirror, but I have a deformity—"

"Long-Eared Tomomo sends me *mangled* humans to pour my drink?"

"No, no, I am whole, it is only that I was born with three breasts instead of two. My parents were ashamed of me, Tomomo—Tommy—took me from the barges of Ajanabh."

Oluwakim blinked with his one colossal eye—once, twice.

"That is a meager qualification. I suppose your provincial modesty would preclude you from *showing* me this miraculous breast, and so I must take you at your word. Yet who would dare lie in the presence of the Ocular? Very well, I accept you as a decent enough monster; you may pour the ale."

He settled himself at the head of the table, a gesture that was not unlike a boulder settling onto a valley floor. His companions seemed to come to life and went about their business, ignoring Sigrid completely. She poured for the

King and stood silently aside, waiting for him to finish his cup. He had finished three before he spoke again.

"Come, Sigrid. Sit."

Obediently, she sat, a safe space away from the blue-black monarch.

"We have chartered the *Maidenhead* for our Hunt—you know what it is the Arimaspians hunt, do you not?"

"No, sire."

"Ignorant Sigrid, your education does not befit the serving-girl of a King. We hunt the Griffin, the White Beast of the Hidden Isle…"



The Griffin and the Arimaspians have been enemies since the birth of the World-Eye at the center of the heavens. For them, the World-Eye blinked three times: They received the strength of both Eagle and Lion, and the size of Elephant. For us, the World-Eye blinked four: we received the strength of Bull, the beauty of Wildcat, the skill of Spider, and the secret of forging the Great Ocular, which is the golden eye you see in my skull, the mark of the King and of the Oluwa clan, the magical iris which grants power beyond the dreams of little deformed girls. These other eyes of bronze and silver are merely fashion, imitations of glory. It is only the Ocular which confers power, only the Ocular which is the heart of our people, who come into this world one-eyed, in the image of the World-Eye which is our beloved parent.

The Griffin have always been jealous of the Fourth Blink.

We have learned through the ages to wage a civilized kind of war with them: In the spring, they steal our horses for their suppers; in the winter, we steal their gold to adorn our hair and to fashion the Ocular—for all Griffin love gold as they do their own lion-haunched chicks. Their nests are woven of the stuff, their beaks and talons are solid metal, they bathe in underground pools of liquid light. But though they love the sight of gold, they cannot eat it. Their favorite meal is horse—it is to them as chocolate and peppermint are to children. They snatch the beasts by the bellies and devour them in midair. A Griffin-Raid is truly a sight to see: The sky is alive with wheeling wings of red and violet and slashing paws of tawny yellow, stained with horse blood.

Our horses were the largest of chest and powerful of leg, great behemoths of horse-kind. Each of us possessed what the other desired. And so it went in this way, in the *proper* way, for century upon century. The Griffin were careful to leave enough horses for the next spring's colts to thrive; we took only what gold we needed for our rites, for it is well known that when a Griffin's gold is gone, it perishes of despair.

But the fathers of our fathers became greedy as dogs in a pig's trough. They began to take more and more gold from the nests of the Griffin, and to hunt them down when the season was not right, when the sun blazed in the sky instead of hiding its face under the snow's crossed spears. The Griffin took their revenge—they gobbled up our herds, mare and stallion. They slurped the marrow and lapped up the eyes of our most magnificent animals. When we had no more horses, the Griffin began to take the beautiful maidens of our tribe, whose dark shoulders glinted like the pelts of cats and whose voices were sweet as autumn harvests.

When I was born, there were only a few Griffin left in the world, hidden away in mountains and forgotten mines, in vales concealed by sheets of ice, in the desert where the wind burns. Likewise, there were only a few maidens left in the Ocular—and no horses at all. When the time came for the Ritual of Ob, which would make me a man and allow me to take the place of my father, Oluwatobi the Ever-Watchful, as King of the Arimaspians, there were but two remaining Griffin. One dwelt on the Hidden Isle, in the Boiling Sea, whose water steams with constant bubbles. The other hid itself away in an aerie atop the great Mount Nuru, a mountain made entirely of ruby, whose light blinds all who approach it.

Oluwatobi gave me a choice of these dangers, for the Ocular must be forged of Griffin-gold according to the ancient rites or else it is no more than a lump of slag pressed into a man's face. Of course we bent under the guilt of our fathers' fathers' lust for gold, but we could not defy the traditions of our people. We had to have the gold, whatever the cost to the Griffin—it is our *right,* you understand. The Ocular is all things; without it we are like a leopard without a head. I could no more deny the Ritual of Ob than I could deny my own limbs. And after all, we had no more horses left; the scale would not be balanced until the Griffin had no gold. In the end, I chose the ruby crags, for

we are not a seafaring people. With the blessing of my father I clothed myself in the spotted skins of wildcats and the mirror-bright breastplate of the sons of Oluwa, forged from the gold of the first Griffin's hoard. I went out from the Arimaspian veldt, and sought out the Red Mountain of Nuru.

In those days I carried in my head an eye of beryl, which is the mark of the heir, for the Griffin lay eggs of beryl, and the gold of their yolks is the purest of all. I traveled easily in my strength, and ate the meat of young deer at my night fire. The Red Mountain was not far from the boundaries of the Oculos—indeed its scarlet lights could be glimpsed from my father's hut when the sun set low in the winter sky, shining through the peak like arrows dripping with blood. I followed the light of Nuru, but in my heart I quailed, for I did not know how I could protect my precious fleshly eye from the scalding prisms of its faceted stones.

But the World-Eye does not close on its favored children, and on the ninth day of my travels, I sighted another creature hobbling through the smoke-scented brush. As I drew closer, I began to perceive what sort of beast it was, and guess at its shape. It was a Monopod, a race of beings who live further to the East than even my people, and whose lower bodies are twisted into a single huge calf and foot—the foot itself so large that legend tells of a bygone age when fleets of Monopods sailed the ocean on those huge, curving soles. My fellow traveler was just this sort of man, but not being on the waves his gait was somewhat less than graceful. He was hopping and shuffling merrily along, dressed in a beautiful vest of many colors and a strange kind of skirt which accommodated his fleshy leg, kicking up a great cloud of broken leaves and dust.

"Hail, Monopod!" I cried, and held up both hands as a gesture of friendship.

"Hail, Cyclops!" he cried in return, turning towards me with a toothy grin. Indeed, several of his teeth were missing, and his hair was a disaster of curls darkened by the dirt of the road.

"You are mistaken, Stump-Leg," answered I with some indignant pride. "The Cyclops is an island-dweller and a drunkard besides. They are not even cousins, the sheep-herding simpletons, but an embarrassment to all one-eyed folk. I am the heir to the Arimaspian Oculos, Oluwakim by name."

The Monopod looked shrewdly at me, his blue eyes glinting like gems in a vault. “Then you’ll be headed for the Red Mountain, yes? For Jin’s nest. I did not realize the old Oluwa had grown so ancient.”

“He is still hale, but the generations increase in the sight of the Eye, and the time of Ob has come again. I aim for the red peak of Nuru, and the Griffin—I did not know his name.”

The Monopod seemed to consider something private, and come to a decision I could not guess. “Well, then! I offer myself as companion and guide to the honorable son of the Oluwa! Chayim is my name, and I am bound for the aerie myself, so it will be no trouble to walk alongside you. With your one eye and my one foot, we almost make a full man! Certainly together we can both get what we want.” He clapped me on the back with his splay-fingered hand and rocked back and forth on his great foot. I agreed—I was glad of the company, I will admit.

“Why do you seek the Griffin?” I asked as we walked—rather, as I walked, and he hobbled.

“Well, that’s quite a story, my young Prince…”



I WAS BORN FAR FROM HERE IN THE SILVER-RICH city of Shadukiam, in the year that the Rose Dome was erected and the diamond turrets were completed in their perfect beauty—all things built with tax money are beautiful: so we must think or go mad. My family was modest—like all Shaduki Monopods we lived in the Ghetto of Moss and Root, a great expanse of open land on the north edge of the Dome. There we were allowed to live as our ancestors had, without the painful constriction of human houses—which we wreck with our clumsiness and which scab our feet with their difficult corners and edges. In the Root we lived out our days on the open moss under the moon that shines like the white rim of a toenail. When the night pulls on her dark socks, we lie on our backs, and our curving feet arch over our heads, protecting us from cold and rain. During the days we work side by side, makers of the famous Rose Vintage, the delicate wines of Shadukiam, whose tiny white grapes we are uniquely equipped to crush.

The Shaduki are disturbed by Monopods. Though monsters and angels of all description walk the streets of the city, though indeed it was the Hsien, men whose wings are greater in span than even the Griffin's and who are no more human than we, who raised the Rose Dome over their spires and rooftops, the Monopods seem to trouble them like no other. To them we are ugly and misshapen. To them we are stupid and slow. To them we are scheming and slant-eyed. Though the wine we crush between our many toes brings in great sacks of silver for the city vaults, whenever disaster occurs we are blamed. If

the snaking Varil does not flood its banks or floods too severely, our hideousness must have offended some god or another. After all, beauty is, of all the exports of Shadukiam, by far the most prized. Beauty and money, and not those diamond sticks, are the twin pillars that hoist the city into the skies.

We take this as gracefully as we can. We live peaceably in the Ghetto of Moss and Root; we do not ask for more. We sleep beneath our feet knowing that we are virtuous, and that one day we will take our wine barrels and sail south on our heel-ships to the promised kingdom of the Antipodes, where the first Monopod walked, and where legend tells us whole nations of our people still dwell.

Because we are not liked, when the Yi came among our people, no one would help us. There was no outcry. The Shaduki shrugged together and were grateful that the Yi had moved on into less desirable portions of the population. Clean out the rats, they said, and leave the cheese for the rest of us.

It was a year before I set off for the Red Mountain that my Tova died. The tendon in her foot was severed when the horses of a passing Shaduki cart trampled her underfoot. This tendon is to us what an artery is to most creatures—when it is cut there is no hope. She survived long enough on her bed of peonies and crabgrass to whisper to me that she wished we could have been married, as we had planned to do after the next barreling season. It was a horror to see her there, unable to lift her foot, the thick leg hanging at a limp and weeping angle, like a broken hinge. We buried her that night, and asked the Root-Paths which connect us all to guide her spirit to the Antipodes, and to rest.

The next morning, I awoke to find my Tova staring curiously at me, her familiar red braids neatly plaited, her cheeks as fat and well-colored as ever. But in her eyes there was no Tova. There was something strange and cold instead, something with teeth. The Thing-That-Was-Not-Tova laughed harshly, a sound like spoons scraping against stone, and hopped away from my patch of violets and bladderwrack without looking behind her.

Of course it was clear to all of us what had happened. We knew of the Yi, but until now it was a plague that only visited the Shaduki. Only they suffered the gruesome sight of their dead loved ones walking among them; only they were forced to watch their children worn like clothing. We had never guessed

it could come among us. But we should have guessed—the Yi could not pass up the *experience* of our strange bodies.

The elders did not want to see the Tova-Thing. They ignored it as though it did not walk through the Root; they would not speak of it, as though not giving it a name would make it leave our home. But the Tova-Thing seemed happy to stay in the Ghetto. We could not force it to wear the moon robes Shadukiam enforced outside our places. It hopped wherever it pleased, curious and silent, except for that awful laugh. I begged the elders for permission to put the body of my Tova to rest and kill the thing that wore her, but they would not give in; they would not soil the Root with a stranger's blood. Finally, I could not bear it any longer—to see my beloved's face laughing at me each morning, as if the Thing inside her knew that she had loved me, and specially enjoyed seeing my face twisted up in pain. I went into the city center, to find a way to give my Tova peace.

It was said that one of the Yi kept a human apprentice, but I could not risk consulting such a corrupted creature. And anyway, what Yi would reveal a secret weakness to a human? He would just as likely strangle me and give my body to his master. No, I had to find a deeper knowledge, a knowledge as old as the Yi itself.

Those who are not accepted with open arms into the bosom of a city often know more about the goings-on of its dark corners than those who sit high on the hill and dine with sapphire forks clinking against golden plates. This is how I came to know of the Anchorite.

In the central square of Shadukiam stands the Basilica of Rose and Silver, whose spires are famed throughout the world for their intricate carvings, whose gargoyles have made women faint at the sight of their grimaces, whose door is carved from a single living cedar whose roots delve deep into the earth beneath the Basilica and whose branches crown its towers. This is what the beautiful and wealthy Shaduki see.

Behind the Basilica, concealed behind a brick wall overgrown with belladonna and other poisonous tendrils which creep and twist, a woman is chained to the church wall. She is clothed in a dress woven from the hair which even still sprouts from her head—as the black strands grow, her gown lengthens. Her eyes are bright and wild, rolling in her head like a baker's pins.

She has no mouth; her face is blank and smooth where her mouth should be. It is said that she scrapes letters in the soil when she wishes to speak, and that there is nothing she does not know. It is for this reason she is hidden and chained, so that she will not reveal the secrets of the Shaduki. This is what we who are hated see.



I went to the Anchorite in the early hours of the morning, before the Basilica held its Mass of Coins, before the Tova-Thing roused itself. I ducked behind her wall, careful not to touch the green growth that clutched hungrily at it, and crouched at the side of the mouthless creature. She was huddled against the stone church, knees clutched to her chest, staring at me with her blank, mad eyes. She made no sound—I suppose I could not have expected more.

"Help me, Anchorite. One of the Yi has taken the body of my Tova, and I cannot bear to see her used so, as though the heart of my heart were no more than a fashionable hat. Help me to kill the Yi in her, and lay her body to rest. I beg you, holy Anchorite, to tell me the secret of bringing death to the deathless."

She stretched out her thin legs, truly no more than bones, and touched my leg with her skeletal hands, stroking the ropy muscles as if divining some fortune from their patterns. Finally, she drew back, her chains clinking against each other like dinner glasses. She pulled at her gown of hair, opening the tangled strands covering her stomach and pulling the plaits open as though they had been fastened with buttons.

Underneath her thick black hair was a fleshy expanse of belly, and in the center of the belly was a perfect mouth, lined with teeth.

It was not unlike any other mouth, except that it opened in the middle of her body, and the voice which issued from it was lower than any woman's voice.

"This Anchorite wonders if you want to get it out of her body, or kill it altogether? A very different procedure, depending on which it is you aim for." A dark pink tongue slid out of the mouth and licked its lips.

I looked down in shame at my foot, whose once-thick hair had grown sparse with grief. "I want to kill it. I want to destroy it."

"Well enough. I won't ask you if your love is true or any of that rot—it's not my place to judge. After all, I'm a naked woman chained to a wall; I've no business questioning the lifestyles of wine-makers or anyone else."

"Did you choose this prison, my lady?"

"Don't ?my lady' me, little limp-leg." She chuckled, settling herself against the wall so that her chained arms cupped the speaking belly, almost as an expectant mother would cradle her womb. "Of course I chose it! Do you think the priests of the Basilica could keep me, if I did not wish it?"

The Anchorite slipped her wrists from her chains as easily as a child undresses for her bath. She shook her hands at me teasingly and pushed them back into the manacles.

"I am not here for them. I tell them nothing, I give them nothing. Shadukiam is a necropolis; it is only that the streets do not know they are dying. It is a slow poison, a rot that takes centuries to kill. Love of silver, love of beauty, love of *seeming.* The oligarchs do not care what justice is, only what seems just. They do not care what mercy is, only what appears merciful. Thus justice and mercy will always escape them. I am the canker; I am the sore on the flesh of this dying pig. I am for you, and for the others who dwell on the fringes of Shadukiam, who can be saved from its ruin. What knowledge I can give to those who are treated with what seems like kindness, but is unkind, I give. When a Monopod comes to me, I open my hair and show him my true mouth. When the Hsien come, I let them cover me in their wings and I tell them secrets in a cloud of feathers. When a priest comes, when a banker comes, I roll my eyes and piss on their shoes, and they think I am mad."

I knelt—which is not easy for us—and pressed my lips briefly to that secret mouth, in sacrament and thanks. When I pulled away, I saw tears shine in the Anchorite's eyes.

“Then I have no thanks enough, and whether you like the word or no, I will call you Lady. Tell me how to kill the Yi.”

The mouth smiled, and the smile was as full of pity as a spring well is filled with rain. “The only thing that can destroy the spirit of a Yi and force it to the underworld, the only thing that will bind it and keep it from taking the body of another dead wretch, is to pierce the Yi through the eye with the golden talon of a Griffin.”

“Then I shall seek out the Griffin.”

“Ah, I am sorry, my boy, but there are only two left in the world. The Arimaspian hordes have slaughtered the rest in their lust for gold. The female, called Quri, dwells in the Boiling Sea; the male, called Jin, at the peak of the Red Mountain of Nuru, whose slopes will blind you before you approach its smallest peak. And neither is in the habit of severing his or her talons for grieving lovers.”

“Nevertheless, I will seek out the Griffin. I cannot do less for my Tova. I cannot leave her like this, to be used up and discarded when she no longer even bears the face I know so well.”

“Then I suggest the male,” she said with a sigh. “The female would dine on your liver before you had hopped three steps onto her beach. Go, if you are determined. But go now; the parishioners approach and the Yi is even now turning the flesh of your woman to crags and craters.”

The Anchorite closed her gown of hair over her mouth and huddled once more against the wall, keening back and forth in an impressive display of madness. That very day I left the Rose Dome and turned my foot toward Nuru and its red cliffs.

The Tale of the Griffin and the King, Continued

I WALKED ALONGSIDE CHAYIM, WHO HAD GROWN slower in his halting gait as he told his story.

"I am sorry my people have made this more difficult for you. It is true we hunted the Griffin and took more than our share. We are ashamed of this."

"But you still hunt the poor beast. And how can you take your share of something that is not yours?"

"You do not understand; you are not of the Oculos. Our mistake was not in hunting the Griffin, but unbalancing the war between us. The Griffin's gold is ours; we are blessed by the Fourth Blink of the World-Eye. It is ours by right and by strength of arms. But we should have been satisfied with the world as it was, and not sought more gold than we needed. Without the Ocular, we are nothing. It is the golden eye that makes us Arimaspians. How can we be denied that which we are? How dare any Griffin deny it to us, even to the last of their kind?"

Chayim scratched his grimy hair. "What exactly does it do?"

"When forged according to the Ritual of Ob and pressed into the skull of the King, it grants him the strength of ten men, and a lifespan three times his natural length. The Ocular can see far beyond our kingdom, into cities and wild lands on the other side of the world. It allows him to guide his people, to influence them and give his vision to the tribe. He sees far beyond the space of one tribe, and far beyond the life of one man, for his own life sees the death three times over of all he loves. The Ocular draws the Stare of the World-Eye,

and ensures the survival of our nation. Without it, the Eye would slide from us, and we would perish from the face of the earth." My voice shook with passion —these are the deepest faiths of my father's fathers.

"And with all that perspective, no King of yours could see that the line of Griffins would end, and there would be no more gold for your Ocular?"

I shrugged. "The Eye will provide. They ate our herds by the hundreds and thought nothing of it—why should we be counted as less than they?"

Chayim shook his head—like most outsiders, he could not accept the superiority of our claim, or the obvious need for the Griffin to submit to us. I was a little disappointed. After all, I understood his need to put his woman to rest perfectly. "I had hoped to simply ask for the gift of a talon, but after such losses surely Jin will not part with one. It will have to be stolen."

I put a comforting arm around my compatriot. "One must always steal from Griffin. They cannot be reasoned with. You would not try to beg a gift from a wild hog—a Griffin is no different."

We walked in silence for some time, and the red silhouette of Nuru grew before us like a living flame. It had begun to prick at my eye, to scratch at my lashes and pull tears from behind my lid. I rubbed at it, trying to clear my sight, and knuckled away the tears as they swelled up. I could see that Chayim was also weeping; only a little at first, but then more and more until tears streamed down his face and mine in salt rivers. We could not look at the jagged peaks, or the sunlight filtering through them in thick red-violet shafts. I fell to my knees; Chayim crumpled and lay on his side, breathing shallowly, unable to raise his head towards the glowering mountain.

"It is like a riddle," he gasped, his hairy toes twitching. "How do a man with one leg and a man with one eye climb a mountain without looking at it?"

My chest was tight as a skin stretched over the barrel of a drum. I loosened the leather straps of my breastplate, trying to catch my breath as my eyes clouded with tears. As I pulled it away from my body, I glimpsed the mountain reflected in its polished surface, and found that I could look at the image in the metal without pain. I turned to the Monopod and smiled.

"The breastplate, Chayim, the breastplate will guide us. I will carry you on my shoulders and your foot—your colossal, beautiful foot—will block the sight

of the ruby slopes from us both. Hold the cuirass before you like a mirror and direct my steps. It will be slow, but we will reach the Griffin's aerie."

And in this way, an ungainly beast ascended the heights of Nuru. Chayim's gnarled trunk was not so heavy as it first seemed, and his great knee pressed only a little into my now-bare chest. The scarlet facets rose up around us, but I saw none of it, only the fleshy surface of his foot, covered with hair like moss on the root of an ancient tree. I studied the patterns of his yellow toenails; I counted the pores in his heat-cracked skin. Only the Monopod glimpsed the beauty of those crags; only he saw what no man yet had seen without paying the price of his eyes.

I still envy him that sight.

After a full day and night of climbing, Chayim called out to me that the peaks were no longer blindingly red, but had darkened to violet, and gave off no light to harm us, but rather seemed to pull the light of the sky, the spires below, and the breastplate into itself and extinguish it. We could look at it—so long as we did not look down into the inferno of stones below—and not be hurt.

I set him down and we clambered up the last few boulders, strange and alien stones pocked like purple moons. No plant grew—the mountain at this height was a great dead thing, scarred and pitted—and the sharp rim of the windswept crater loomed up ahead of us.

Perched just below the blasted crater, so precariously it seemed ready to tumble from its niche at any moment, was the nest of the Griffin.

I was surprised—the nest did not shine or sparkle as I would expect gold-thatch to sparkle. It was a dull yellow, mottled and dim, clearly gold, but dusted with feathers, its color dampened by the use of its owner. The Griffin itself was, of course, predictably magnificent. His haunches took all the burden of golden shades his nest had abandoned, his tail whipping back and forth behind him like a snake, tufted with a little flame of orange fur. His plumage was a garish turquoise and green, with flashes of deep red underfeathers peeking out from beneath the sea-colored wings. His face was broad, his metallic beak half a mouth, drawn back in a snarl. The wind roared around us, his voice vying with it for deafening power.





"Go away, Arimaspian! I have nothing for you! Your ape grandfathers have killed us and stolen from us and cracked our eggs on their knees—you think I will portion out my gold for you like a shopkeeper? I wish rotting diseases on all your children!"

I was prepared for the abuse. Those who are not beloved of the World-Eye always harbor hatred for those who are. But the Monopod looked panicked—it seemed to him, I imagine, that it was impossible to convince such an irrational creature to part with any piece of itself. Of course that is true—I never had his silly intention of asking for what I needed. I drew my curved silver knife and advanced on the Griffin, who reared on his hind legs and beat the savage wind with his blue wings.

"Jin, Jin!" Chayim cried, falling to his knee in desperate terror. "Listen to me and I will not let him hurt you!"

The Griffin and I laughed at the same moment, both amused by the idea of the hapless Monopod staying my hand or protecting such a beast in any way. Chayim looked at me pleadingly, and his chapped lips mouthed the single word: *Tova*. I lowered my knife but did not sheath it.

"Who told you my name, one-leg? Griffins guard their names as their gold!"

"It was told to me by the Anchorite of Shadukiam, noble Jin. I am sure she meant no harm—she knows my need is great."

The Griffin folded his wings swiftly and leaned forward, his face suddenly soft and eager as a chick's.

"Giota? Giota sent you to me?"

I was forgotten. The two creatures were suddenly intent on each other, and on the ghost of this third creature who was not on the mountain. I could have sunk my knife in the Griffin's emerald flank then, and had my choice of his body or his nest to make my eye. But I did not; I was merciful; I was, I admit, curious.

"Yes, yes, she sent me; she said that you would help me. Please—I must have a talon of yours, so that I may kill a thing and save my beloved."

But the Griffin was not listening. He beckoned Chayim to him and allowed the Monopod to awkwardly climb into his nest, so that the excited, reedy voice of the bird-beast, now soft with wonder, could be heard easily above the wind. I strained forward to hear, and Chayim lay like a babe cradled in those iridescent wings.

"Little lumpish man, Giota brought my sister into this world…"



She was the runt of our litter—the smallest egg, last laid, white beryl with stripes of cobalt and a cord of quartz streaking through the curve like a splash of milk. My mother feared that it would not hatch at all, and she would be left with a dead rock to nurse. But she sat on it all the same, sharing the warmth of her hindquarters with three other eggs, all much grander and larger than the white one. They were her real hope—the violet, the flame-colored, and the deep blue.

Of course the Arimaspian horde came when the greedy Oluwas needed another bushel of gold. They were de lighted to find my mother had laid her eggs; the yolk of our agate eggs is the purest ore of all. Though she screamed and slashed at them with her forepaws, the men dashed my siblings against the rocks and scooped up the precious stuff. The indigo Griffin squeaked and died, half-formed, in a puddle of golden yolk, and the flame-bright brother I might have had did not even manage so much—his skull was cracked when the egg burst. Only I survived, who was laid first, for we are not birds: we give eggs one at a time, during each moon of the mating autumn. I was large enough that I tumbled out, a bundle of screeching feathers and fur streaked in ropy gold. But Arimaspians have no use for live Griffin chicks; our beaks are too small to yield much metal. They made their escape, baskets brimming, though a handful met my mother's claws.

My sister's egg was so small that they had not even noticed it.

In her grief, my mother could not accept that all her children but one had perished, and with me clutched to her back and the unhatched egg clasped in her talons, she flew from the heights of Nuru into Shadukiam, where all manner of secret things are known. It is said that in Al-a-Nur all the wisdom of heaven is kept, but if you seek the dank, reeking magic of the underworld, if you want real power, to Shadukiam you must go. My mother was wise; she went directly beneath the Rose Dome and ensconced herself on the roof of the Basilica, among the waving branches of the Door-Tree, where she sent up her mourning cries like bells tolling the hours. So it went for a full fortnight, and the city could not sleep for the noise.

Giota was young then, and she alone was brave enough to answer my mother's cry. She climbed the walls of the Basilica like a little monkey, her short braids swinging. In those days she did not wear her gown of hair, but dressed as any of her kind would, and kept her locks cropped and knotted like a penitent. She crawled over the arched cupola painted with silver stars, and crouched before my mother, panting. Her face, of course, was smooth where her lips should have been, but she pulled open her tidy black vest to show her belly-mouth, and called out:

"Mother Griffin, cease your cries! Giota is here, she will mend your egg."

"How can you know that it is my egg which wounds me?" My mother beat her rose-gold wings impressively, to instill the proper fear in a flightless creature. I chirruped beside her, eager to help.

"Giota knows much. She can hear your wails—and would never mistake a mother's grief for any other kind. Give over the egg; I will quicken it."

My mother was desperate, and she knew no other would come clambering up the cathedral walls. "These are the last, little Giota. My bright blue son and this stunted white egg. The last Griffins in all the world. The one-eyes have slaughtered all the rest, and the next time one of their Princes itches for an eye, they will slaughter me. Save my egg and you will have gold, more than you could wish for."

Giota shook her head ruefully. "That is the other Shadukiam, the one which does nothing if it does not bring them jewels and silver. I will do this because I wish to. If reward comes to me, it will come in its own time, and in its own way. Giota does not bargain for lives. Only pray that the egg contains a hen."

My mother held out her massive paw and relinquished the snowy egg into the hands of the strange-mouthed woman, whose blank face showed nothing. She held it for a moment, as if measuring the heft of the beryl, and then, without warning, she opened the mouth in her belly and swallowed my sister whole.

Mother and I howled together in rage and betrayal, and we lunged at the little woman, blue cub and crimson dam. But Giota held up her hands, her eyes flashing warnings no mouth could utter. Her voice was choked by the egg, and it took all her strength to speak around it.

"Giota has not hurt the egg! How do you expect a woman to quicken an egg if not in her belly? I will carry it until it is ready to hatch—alone of all Griffins it will be born of woman, not of hen, not of lioness. See? Already it has begun to grow! Ah, my jaw! Have no fear, Giota is a good house for your baby."

Indeed, her belly had swelled, and her mouth now stretched over a little paunch, a firm moon-shaped bulge that increased in size even as we watched her, in mixed horror and hope. She patted the bird-swell with satisfaction.

"Giota is hungry. You must feed us until the egg is ready to crack."

And so my mother swept down from the turrets of the Basilica each day to hunt for her surrogate, bringing her strips of nameless meat and branches dripping with fruit. I worked the meat around the corners of the egg, into her throat. I trickled water past the shell into her parched belly. She ate a horrifying amount of food—my mother could not keep her full. From dawn to eventide she ate, and grew, and ate again. After a single day she could no longer speak. After a week she could not walk. But while my mother combed the city for sweetmeats, Giota and I played in the strange nursery of the many-towered, many-branched church roof—she tousled my fur and groomed my feathers, leaning weakly against the spires. I picked flies from her hair with my beak. I was sorry she could not wrestle with me, but her belly made her tired, and I did not want to hurt the chick inside. A baby Griffin is not small—I was already the size of a young horse, and before long, the paunch of Giota's stomach had grown so massive she could not move at all, and her mouth was pulled into a continual grimace by the growing flesh. She never cried out in pain, and she was always ready to stroke my tail. I was sorry she could not play anymore, but I lay down and let her prop herself up against my flank where

the feathers meet the fur—a thing which is almost never done between Griffins and humans, even humans as inhuman as Giota. But I did not know about propriety then. I knew only that I loved Giota, and inside her was my sister, and I wanted her to be comfortable.

Finally a day dawned when Giota was so large that her belly dwarfed the rest of her body, as though she had become a snail, and her shell was made of skin. She gave one long sigh, and the mouth crowning her monstrously stretched womb gaped open further than I could have thought possible. I admit that I turned away from the sight—I was a child, and easily disgusted. But I peeked through my feathers and saw an enormous white egg emerge from Giota, perfect and round, its color no longer sallow and opaque but lustrous as a pearl, shot through with delicate blue veins of cobalt and amethyst.

My mother crowed and nuzzled the egg tenderly, rubbing her body over it to give the gem her scent. She clucked and preened in delight, and as she wrapped her long rose-colored wings around her egg, a deep cracking sound filled the windswept towers. The top of the orb split, much as Giota's belly had split, and my sister Quri emerged, pure white, blinking her deep black eyes at the sudden sun.

She pecked her way out of the shell with an almost dainty fastidiousness, and my mother, seeing that she had produced a daughter and that the race of Griffins would survive, began to weep in relief, her golden tears dripping onto the dome of the Basilica and mingling with the painted silver stars. My sister fluttered her pale wings and stumbled from the wreckage of her egg into Mother's wings. I crooned and cleaned the last of the yolk from her feathers with my beak. We were a family, happy and whole.

Into this new nest came Giota, who extended her hand and gingerly stroked her adopted child's fur. We had, of course, forgotten her entirely in our bliss. She was whole, as well, and showed no sign of the strange birth, save that her belly was worn and loose, like any woman who has just given birth. Her weary mouth smiled.

"Giota has done well," she said roughly. "Griffins will live, and keep their gold. For a while, anyway."

My mother turned to the little Witch and enfolded her entirely in her wings, an embrace I never saw her grant again until the night she died, when she held my sister and me thus. When she pulled back, both mothers were weeping.

It was much later that Giota became the Anchorite of Shadukiam, and wove a dress from her hair. My sister was with her the day Giota forged her chain—she helped her fix it to the Basilica wall. Since our mother was killed, as she knew she would be, by an Arimaspian Prince, Giota has been the beloved friend of my sister and me—though she and Quri have always been the closer pair. They share the womb bond, and I cannot touch that, born as all Griffins but one are, from egg and never flesh.

Alone of flightless things, Giota is loved by the Griffin. We miss her, both of us. We miss her so.



I WAS UNIMPRESSED BY THE GRIFFIN'S DISPLAY OF sentiment. But Chayim had tears in his eyes, and the two were clearly tight as a King and his eye over the memory of this village Witch.

"Jin, the Anchorite must have known you would re member her; she must have meant for you to help me. Give me your talon, so that I may kill the Yi that possesses my love and give her peace. I beg you—take it from your hind paw, so that you are still fierce, but give me a talon!"

Jin cocked his head to one side, for a moment ridiculously like a chicken contemplating strewn corn in a yard. "Why should I sever a piece of my own body so that you can borrow it? I do not grow new talons if one is ripped from my footpad. Would it not be simpler for me to carry you on my back to Shadukiam? I will kill your Yi for you myself—a claw through the eye is easy enough. And I will see Giota again—my heart longs to see how long her dress has grown."

The Monopod leapt to his foot and shouted his assent over the howl of the mountain wind. The two were quite prepared to disembark at that very moment, without a thought for me, who had carried the selfish cripple all the way to the summit! I cleared my throat loudly, and both fools turned to stare at me, as though I had suddenly appeared in a puff of magic smoke. For a moment the three of us simply stood, blinking stupidly.

Finally, Jin—for I suppose, since I know the mangy bird's name, I should use it—rose to his full height and shook his feathers clean of gold fibers from his

nest. He was larger than I had suspected, dwarfing the elephants I had killed with my hunting mates, and his feathers were so blue they seemed to leech the color from the sky.

"Take it from the nest, Arimaspian dog. Take it from the nest and I will not stop you. But swear to me that you will never return to the Red Mountain, and that your people will never again trouble me for my gold. Swear it on your Ocular, on your rheumy, stinking World-Eye, and you may have my nest."

I smiled, beautifully, and my teeth glistened in the sun.

"I swear it by the Ocular and the World-Eye: Neither I nor any of my race will come near to you again."

Jin nodded curtly and seized Chayim by the grimy collar of his vest and swung the poor man onto his broad turquoise back. Snorting in derision, he leapt from the peak and I was left alone, with Chayim's ecstatic farewells echoing in the fierce wind.

I knelt and began to collect the glittering straws of the Griffin's nest, but my mind was full of the White Beast, Quri, and visions of my sons festooned in her gold.



OLUWAKIM GRINNED HUNGRILY AT ME.

"This is where we steer your ship now—to the White Beast in the center of the Boiling Sea, the Searing Sea, the last of all the Griffin, and we will take all the gold we need. I will forge a new Ocular for my heir and we will have victory, finally, over those not blessed by the World-Eye."

Sigrid sat back, stunned. She pulled nervously at the frayed ends of her hair.

"What happened to Chayim? Did he and Jin kill his Yi? I hear the Yi are terrible creatures—they have never come to Ajanabh, thank all the Stars in the sky."

The King of the Arimaspians shrugged impatiently. "When I forged my Ocular in the fires of Ob, I glanced towards Shadukiam—out of curiosity, no more—and saw the rotting body of his Tova safe in the earth. I suppose they must have done as they planned. It matters nothing to me what a chicken and a cripple accomplish. Jin is dead—this I saw as well, with some satisfaction. Chayim I have not bothered to seek out again. Only the White Beast matters. Only the gold."

Very softly, casting her eyes towards the floor and praying that he would not become angry with her, Sigrid ventured, "Surely you see that if you destroy this last Griffin, there will be no more Ocular for any of your sons? Why not let her live to birth chicks, and ensure the supply of gold for future generations?"

"Ah! She has laid her eggs already, clever Sigrid! This is why we must go now, so that we may catch her before she has hatched them, and harvest the precious yolk! As for the race of Griffin—they robbed us of our horses! No longer are we a clan which can expand our borders, riding swiftly over the steppes with four legs instead of two! We must beg and steal colts from neighbors—and the colts are weak and sickly, they do not thrive! The Griffin deserves extinction. Oh, we will ration the bounty of the White Beast so that the Ocular survives—but I will not let her live!"

"Wait—noble King of the Oluwa, why are *you* questing for the Griffin's gold? If the new Ocular is for your son, why does he not charter the *Maidenhead* and hunt Quri himself?"

At this, the King scowled and blushed at the same moment, his face turning purple with rage or shame—Sigrid could not tell—and within herself she quailed in fear of the giant man. But when he spoke, his voice was small and soft, almost a whisper.

"I have no son, young Sigrid. It is the shame of my house. At first we thought it was a blessing. Since the Griffin took their revenge on our women, we have had few maidens among us. But from the day I swore to let Jin have his wretched aerie, no man of the Oluwa has sired a boy—only girls, acres and acres of daughters, each one more beautiful than the last, and none of them able to take the Ocular. We understand now that it is a curse, and our passion to destroy the Griffin has redoubled. It is against our law, the mandate of the Eye, to allow a female to rule us. We have waited as long as we could, praying and sacrificing oxen, so that the Eye would allow some lesser Oluwa at least to sire on his woman a son. And now there are no Oluwa sons—these men you see are from other families, and though they cower in my presence, if the Oluwa do not bestow the Ocular on an heir, they will seize the Kingship for one of their own. I decreed, to preserve the sacred mandate of heaven which by right belongs only to my blood, that my eldest daughter would receive the golden eye this very winter."

The King straightened his glossy back and spoke loudly then, his rich voice booming in the cabin. "But it is not seemly for a girl-child to Quest, or to kill—the honor of the last Griffin-Hunt *must* belong to a man! Thus I have taken the burden of the hunt in the name of the fair Oluwafunmike, who will be Queen.

In her name I will slaughter the White Beast, and forge the golden eye—alone of all Kings I will brave the fires of Ob twice!"

The men around him, with their many-colored eyes, bowed and scraped their allegiance and praised the name of Oluwafunmike. Sigrid hid her disgust and resolved silently to help the poor Griffin if she could when they arrived, even if Tommy and the rest were obligated to allow their passenger to do what he pleased.

"Sigrid, you listen well. In a woman, this is a kind of beauty, even if you have breasts like a cow's udder and your skin is pale and unhealthy. You will have the honor of serving me until we reach the Boiling Sea. If you perform well, I will make you a pretty trinket from the gold we harvest. You may rejoice—few who are not of the Oculos are allowed so near my person."

Sigrid knew not to argue, and though her stomach lurched in rebellion, she bowed low. In her heart, she fashioned a tiny prayer that Oluwafunmike was wiser and kinder than her father, and sent it up to the Stars, for she knew of no other place to aim.

"But you may go and sleep now, girl, so that you will be fresh for tomorrow's work. I am a good master and I do not expect my attendants to display heroics of endurance. Go and find the Satyr-woman; she will bed you well."

Gratefully, she left the audience of the King, still bowing as she closed the heavy door of the cabin behind her.



Snow had finished her day's netting. A pile of damp gray rope had risen up neatly beside her, and the foreman had pressed two coins into her hand—barely enough to fill her belly for the night. The last of Sigrid's much larger net still trailed from her hands like silver umbilici, the knots skillful and small, catching the last light in their tight twists. But at length, Sigrid, too, finished her tasks and collected her pay—many more and larger coins than the albino child had gotten. Snow screwed up her courage and looked up into Sigrid's creased face. "I cannot bear not to hear the end of your tale!" she cried. "Let me buy you a husk of bread or a mug of beer and tell me the rest!"

Sigrid laughed, her great body shaking like a walrus caught on a drifting ice floe. "Child, you've barely enough in your hand to feed a sparrow! I'm surely parched from all this talking—how I do go on when I'm not interrupted! But I won't take your meager wages. I shall do the buying, and I shall choose the tavern. Good enough?"

Snow nodded eagerly, and as the two walked along the quay, among glittering torches and warm-windowed inns full of rough laughter, she gently slipped her thin fingers into Sigrid's warm hand. She hoped the older woman, whom she now thought of as quite beautiful, would not mind. In answer, Sigrid squeezed her freezing fingers tenderly.

At length they reached the end of the Muireann pier. The salt-scoured boards smoothed out to a well-maintained dirt road, the noise and bustle of the other seaside folk faded. There Sigrid stopped below a dilapidated sign,

which swung like a weathercock above a windowless tavern. The sign was painted oddly, with a rough image of a muscled arm grasping a fat, squirming fish by the tail. Below this strange insignia, it read:

The Arm & Trout

"Here we are, girl! Best in town, I promise."

She pushed open the heavy oak door and they slipped inside a tavern much quieter than any Snow had seen. It was terribly dark and smoky—pipes sent up tendrils everywhere. A few tables were scattered about the floor, which seemed to have far more than four corners, peopled with shadowy figures she could not quite make out, but they shrunk away from the open door. The bar itself was a decrepit slab of what might once have been cherry wood, but had petrified over the years. It was slightly uneven, and patrons clutched their mugs and tankards to keep them from sliding to the floor. Wedged behind the bar was a great hulk of a man who looked as though some giant had simply dropped an armful of limbs into a heap. He brandished a thick rag like a sword, and the rusted iron of his eyes dared anyone to order a drink. His hair was the color of sandy shoals that trapped the hulls of ships; his hands were the size of well-wrought drums, and he smelt of lamp oil and brine.

Sigrid marched directly to the ramshackle bar and slapped her thick coins onto the stained wood. "Evening, Eyvind! Beer for me—spiced wine for the little one."

Eyvind grunted assent and busied himself with the drinks, turning his back to them. Snow saw that Sigrid did not take her eyes from his hulking back while he worked, seeming to linger on his enormous frame as though trying to memorize it. When he turned back, she drew her eyes back like a thief caught with her hands full of pocket watches.

Sigrid collected both drinks and settled herself at a small table that gave a wide view of the rest of the tavern. She pushed the wine towards Snow and smirked with satisfaction as the girl swallowed it down—it warmed her from the roots of her colorless hair to the tips of her shivering toes.

"Specialty of the house. This is the Arm—it's where those of us who are, well, slightly off the map of Muireann come. Look around, love. Here there be monsters."

Snow saw then that the figures huddled at their tables were not so shapeless as they had seemed: Under a woolen hood, one had the beak of a pelican; another's webbed legs were tucked under his chair. Each drink the Arm had served was attached to some fabulous creature—some on all fours against the back wall drinking from a trough. In the dim light of a rusted chandelier Snow thought she could make out the shapes of creatures at least half animal, and some men on all fours, slurping happily beside their bestial brethren. She could not be sure that she did not spy a Djinn sitting on his cushion of smoke near the back door. Some of the faces were human, but their eyes belied their features. Even Eyvind seemed to be different, his movements not quite manlike. Not for the first time, she wondered if her new friend was indeed all she appeared to be.

"It is the only place we feel welcome, the only place we belong. Eyvind keeps the place and he turns no one away—it is a kindness. The Muireanners leave us alone, so long as we hide ourselves away. There are two Shadukiams; there are two Muireanns. Maybe Al-a-Nur is the only city which does not have two of itself. Maybe not even Al-a-Nur. But we were not yet returned to my city, were we? We were on the *Maidenhead,* with Saint Sigrid in her bunk, sharing blankets with a Satyr…"



The sailors of the *Maidenhead,* despite the apparently endless amount of room belowdecks, slept two to a bunk. It was drafty in their quarters, and the doubling up kept them warm—besides which, the habit among them was to pair a senior woman to a more inexperienced girl and trust that the one would educate the other in all she needed to know about the running of a ship and the life of piracy.

Eshkol and Sigrid huddled under their blankets in the damp and cold of any bed at sea, though beneath her fur Eshkol seemed not to feel it at all. Sigrid shivered and was restless—a ship rocked and creaked much more than a barge, and she could not find comfort in the constant rocking and lurching.

"You get used to it." Eshkol laughed quietly. "It took me months to be able to sleep without solid ground under me. Some of the other girls take to it like bees to a hive. It's different for everyone."

Sigrid held the gray blanket over her head with tented fingers, studying her companion's face—it was soft and friendly, and the woman seemed to be made entirely of shades of brown, like the trunk of a tree. Her hair and fur were deep as earth, her skin tan and tawny, her eyes nearly black. "How long until we reach the Boiling Sea? I imagine it will be much worse then. Will the *Maidenhead* survive the water?"

"Oh, the *Maid*'s all manner of magic. Comes from being born, not built, you know? That and the Star's tears. Don't you worry—a little hot salt water won't even chip the paint. We should reach the edges of it by morning."

Sigrid sighed and tried to shift to a better position on the wooden bunk. “How did you come to be here, Eshkol? Did they kidnap you, too? Surely the captain can’t steal all her crew; it seems like that would take a great deal of time.”

Eshkol laughed again, a sound like damp leaves falling into a swift-running creek. “No, no, I came aboard of my own will. I volunteered.” She propped herself up on one elbow. “I’m not tired either. I don’t mind telling the tale—it’ll pass the hours till dawn…”



I WAS THE FAVORITE DAUGHTER OF MY COPSE—NO other of my sisters or my briar-bearded brothers did our parents love more. The Yew was a large and prosperous family; we had enough to eat and plenty of wine to make us merry. We were known far and wide for the amazing number of offspring each Yew managed to produce—daughters and sons dropped from each of us like cones from a pine. We were envied by the Willow and Larch copses, positively worshipped by the poor Firs, who were lucky to have one child in a century.

The Forest held us all in its green shadows, and the race of Satyrs went about life as we always had: we chased the prettier fauns and drank ourselves into fits of giggles under a cornucopia of stars. It was a simple life. If a Satyr died, which did happen now and again, he did not so much die as plant himself, and from the place where he went to root a tree would grow that we could still love and converse with as though our uncle or cousin were still with us. From this had come the names of our copses, in the beginning of the world when the Forest was new—the first of us sent up trees of unrivaled beauty and size, whose branches arched like embracing arms over the meadows and glens. Their descendants took the names of these gods among trees and thus I am called Yew, my friend is called Birch, and her friend is called Pine.

And so it was that I sat under the bristling branches of the great Yew the day the man in the vulture-skin came to the Forest.

I was too young to mate, but only barely—the fauns were beginning to gather around our door like snails after a rainstorm. As all the Yew girls are, I

was lovely as a spring sapling. The color was high and bright as a dahlia in my cheeks, and my voice was high and perfect as a grass whistle. My father kept me near to him, for Satyrs are not known for their restraint in the presence of a sweet-faced girl. But that day of all days, I slipped his sight while he prayed over the cut wood for the evening's fire and curled up against the dark, knotted wood of Grandfather Yew.

Good rainfall last winter, he hummed. *Too many squirrels, but what can you do?*

I chased a few of the chittering fellows away with flung cones.

Sunshine this spring was of the highest quality, he harrumphed. *Savory as biscuits.*

I scratched affectionately at the bark behind a sappy burl.

"Would you like to buy a skin?" the voice came from behind the Yew, and for a moment I had the two confused in my ear, wound together like a weed and a rose. But then they separated, and the strangest creature emerged from behind my grandfather.

He had a lion-skin pulled up over his head—a frayed, ratty old thing with mats in its fur and a mane that hung down into his eyes like unkempt hair. The skinny paws hung limply over his shoulders and the sorry tail hung down around his ankles—which were scaly and black, and tipped in claws like a buzzard's, and beneath the lion pelt I saw the tips of wings. In his hands was a fat leather satchel, bulging like a wine-skin.

"How about it, pretty goat-girl?" He smiled, a broad young face with a pointed chin and hairy eyebrows.

"A skin, sir?" I said, curious as all young things are.

"Oh, yes, my dear. I am Ghassan, the Skin-Peddler. All sorts of skins! Skins for a penny, skins for a meal, skins in trade and skins in debt, skins for all occasions. Besides the noble lion you see displayed on my own humble shoulders, I have on my person many fine articles: Strix-skins and Manticore-skins and Mermaid tails, cloaks of Harpy feathers and capes of Catoblepas, a number of lovely red Leucrotta-skins, very fashionable, shining salamander coats and even a rare ghost-skin, human-skins and Yale-skins and any skin you can think of."



"What in the world would I do with a skin? I've already got a very nice one." But my hand was already reaching for the satchel.

"Why, you wear them, girl! Make a fine dress for those fetching hips or drape it over your comely shoulders when the winter's nip comes a-happening by—skins have a thousand and one uses. Some are magic, some are plain, some will change you, some will change in your hands. A skin is a door—step through it, and see what's on the other side. Me? I like the girl-skins—now don't look shocked. I peddle; I don't procure. It's none of my nevermind how they became detached from their owners."

"How odd, to prefer another person's skin."

"No more odd than court ladies who prefer to wear blue sashes or shoes of jade and glass. Why, I'm wearing six or seven skins at this very moment—it always pays to display the merchandise to effect."

I peered at his legs, his wings, his long, silvery hair, but could spy no seam. "Then… what are you beneath your skins?"

He leaned into me, confidant-close. "I'll never tell," said Ghassan. "But enough about me! Wouldn't you like to try one for your own? Better than any blue sash, I assure you."

I blushed, deep as damask. "I haven't any money, sir. My father thinks young folk ought to keep to acorns and leaves until they've a good pair of horns on their head."

"A shame, a shame. But a man must eat, no matter what skin he's in."

The Skin-Peddler turned to leave, to go on to his next customer, who would surely have piles of opals and emeralds in his fireplace grate and buy up the whole lot, while I had to suffer skinless with no coin at all of my own. I was paralyzed with anguish, and I must have let out a little cry, a half-bleat, because he turned halfway back to me.

"I suppose I could let you have this one for very little," he mused, and pulled from his satchel a very strange skin, folded over many times. It was rubbery and gray, dull and mottled, and did not look like it would make a very fine sash at all.

I did not care—I wanted it like a squirrel wants the highest nut in the walnut tree. "What would I have to do for it?" I asked, shuffling my hooves a little.

"Well, I don't suppose you'd trade your own skin—and I've no need of Satyr in my inventory at the moment anyhow. But I would take a strip or two of bark from this lovely tree of yours. Quite a rarity, the grandparent-trees."

I think not, groused the Yew. Of course Ghassan heard nothing—blood speaks to blood, sap to sap, and to the rest the forest is silent.

"Oh, Grandfather, you'll never miss it," I assured him, "and it won't hurt a bit, I promise. And I shall keep the squirrels off you all winter this year." Hurriedly, before he could protest further, I stripped off two long pieces of black bark and handed them over.

I tried not to listen to him whimper as I pulled them from the wood.

Ghassan handed over the rubbery skin with a grin on his sparsely whiskered face. "A pleasure, prettiest of girl-slips. Farewell—I don't imagine we'll meet again." He pocketed the bark and strode back over the damp grass.

I pressed the skin to my heart and hid it beneath my bed when I came home for supper—I breathed its salty, watery scent dozens of times before I reached my own door. How proud I was! When I lay down to sleep I pulled it out again and held it to my chest, feeling its cold weight on my own skin.

It was such a small sound, when I think on it now. Knuckles on glass, a rapping at the window. I was startled as a sparrow to look up and see two huge, gray eyes looking through the pane at me. They belonged to a young man, no older than I, with dark hair and skin so pale it seemed bloodless.

"Please," he said, "let me in."

"Certainly not," I whispered, so as not to wake a father already suspicious of every suitor's knock. But I unlatched the window and opened it, just the smallest of cracks. The youth looked at the skin clutched in my arms.

"Miss, I'm afraid you have something that belongs to me."

"And what's that?"

"The skin. It's mine."

"I see plenty of skin on your bones as it is. This is my skin, I bought it, just as fair as a pair of golden scales."

The youth shook his dark head sadly. "You bought it from a beast and a thief, who stole it from me when I was sunbathing on a craggy rock. I am a Selkie, and that is my skin."

I tightened my grip on the little bundle. "But I cut into my grandfather for this. It will grow back, I know it will, but I oughtn't to have done it and if I lose the skin then I will have done it for nothing. This is the only thing that is mine, and not my father's or my mother's or my sisters' or my brothers.'"

"It is not your father's or your mother's or your sisters' or your brothers'. It is *mine*. Please give it back, lovely Satyr, I want to go home, and I cannot until you give it over."

I did not want to cry, but the tears pricked all the same—but I was a clever girl, and I knew all manner of tales. "Wait a moment—what is your name?"

"I am called Shroud."

"And I am Eshkol. If you are a Selkie, and I have your skin, that means you must stay with me and be my lover until you can get the skin back, doesn't it?"

Shroud's shoulders slumped. "Yes, that is the way of it, but I was never like the other seals…"

The Tale of the Skin

I WAS ALWAYS SO CAREFUL WITH MY SKIN. THE others let them lie around just anywhere—it is who we are: Who might take it? Whose house might we enter, whose sardines and black bread might we eat, who might we love? It is the chief activity of Selkies to have their skins stolen.

But I was careful. I loved the sea, I loved the waves and the breakers and the curling white foam. I loved the changing character of the sea, how it could be choppy and gray or smooth as glass, like the brow of a wife. I loved the taste of the water, and I was afraid of what it would be like to be closed up into a house, without the slap of the wind and the cry of the gulls.

I did not mean to fall asleep. I was sunning my silver stomach on a desolate rock in the shallows, basking in the heat reflected off of the violet waves, breathing the kelp-spattered air. I had only closed my eyes for a moment when he slipped up, silent as a spear fisherman, and sliced through the skin of my back just as easily as tearing paper.



Such a thing had never occurred—he stripped my skin from me, ripping and rending it, pulling my fingers out of my flippers, my feet out of my tail, my face from my muzzle—I cried out, but my sisters saw from afar only that someone was stealing my skin, and high time, too. They did not see the knife. They did not hear my screams. They cheered from a distant outcropping of stone.

When he was finished he paddled easily to shore and began packing the skin into a fat leather satchel. I followed, swimming clumsily in the man's body I had never once lived in. When we clambered onto the sand, I lay gasping, air burning my unused lungs.

"Where are we going?" I gulped.

The man I came to know as Ghassan stopped and turned to regard me. He was, as he often is, dressed in a woman's skin in those days, a crone with long tangled hair. "Whatever do you mean, young unfortunate?" the crone said.

"You have my skin."

"Oh, yes, that I do."

"I am yours, then. What house will you take me to? What fish and breads shall we eat? Who shall I love?"

"I don't care who you eat or who you love, seal. I only want the skin, and I only want the skin for selling. You are incidental, a pit in a peach."

I rose shakily to feet I had never known. "But this is what I am. My skin is stolen; I must belong to someone."

"You do not belong to me, and I do not want you," the old woman who was Ghassan snorted.

"Then give me my skin back, if you will not have me."

"Not after I cut it with such difficulty from you—you have very stubborn bones."

I was stricken. Ghassan would not close me up in a house, or feed me, or love me. Once I was out of my seal's body, I no longer feared those things, but needed them, needed them as violently as once I needed the sea. I became panicked; the slate sky turned frightening, the dark sea horrible. I did not know where to go; this body seemed afraid of everything. It was chilled easily and always hungry. I followed the crone because the crone had my skin. That is what a Selkie does.

Please, I would say. *Love me or give me my skin. You are hurting me.*

I do not want you, would come the answer.

Please, I would say. *I can be useful. I can make stew and tea. You would like me, if you tried me. Or give me back the skin. You are cutting me.*

I do not like you, I do not want you, would come the answer.

Please, I would say. *I will wash house walls and mend fences, I can build cradles and beat the dust from rugs. Let me be a Selkie, or give me back my skin. You are killing me.*

I do not care, would come the answer.

And so it went on, but I could not stop. I learned he was not a crone at all, and what house he had was on a far distant island where he would certainly not lead me. But I could not stop. The skin is knotted in my belly like a sailor's rope, and the harder Ghassan pulls to escape me, the tighter the knot becomes, and the more desperately I chase him.

My skin is gone, but I belong to no one. I am no seal and no man. The skin calls to me, but I cannot answer.

Please, I would say. *You are killing me.*



"He only traded it to you to be rid of me. I have hounded him for three years and he would not let me touch it, but he traded it to you for two pieces of bark. They may have cost you dear, but to him they mean nothing. They are pieces of skin, not a skin. He only wanted to show me how little my skin was worth. I am so tired, Eshkol. Please."

I grinned up at him through my curly hair. My voice was soft as pine needles underfoot. "I am very good at hiding things, Selkie. You could belong to me. I could close you up in a house, and feed you sardines and black bread, and love you under towering trees. And you know, we Satyrs have very well-deserved reputations. My father says I am too young for a lover, but you are very handsome, and I am not tired at all."

I leaned out of the window very suddenly and kissed the Selkie-boy right on his pale lips—I don't know why I did it, but the moonlight was so bright, and he seemed suddenly ever so much more lovely than the skin. Our lips met over the windowsill and his mouth was so cold, cold and salty and sweet as the sea, and my lips warmed him as the sun warms a tidepool. Even through the kiss I was smiling, and he put his silvery hands gently on my face, just the way a faun does. I moved the skin behind my back.

"Oh, Eshkol," he said breathless and bashful, when we parted, "perhaps I could rest here."

Shroud stayed with me for seven years and seven days. My father was in a rage fit to crack oak boughs when he found us in the morning, a sea-eyed boy with arms wrapped around his daughter's downy neck, but it passed. Shroud was gentler and quieter than low tide, and like the tide, no one could resist his slow presence. We could not kiss often enough—the water loves the green earth and the green earth loves the water, and so we were, twined up like vines on a riverbed, and he told me I tasted of red berries and sunlight on long grass, and I told him he tasted of clamshells and kelp and a wet wind. I taught him to plant grapevine, and he taught me to fish with my bare hands. I grew up; I grew less silly, though no less overeager and bright of heart, and in all my barters since, nothing I won was ever so precious to me as that gray and mottled skin.

My only sadness in those gold-specked years was Grandfather Yew, who had not spoken to me since the day I took his bark, who would not speak to me even after it had long grown back.

One evening Shroud sat next to me in our own house and took my hand. "Eshkol, heart of my heart," he said, "please give me back my skin."

I laughed. We had played this game many times. "It is my skin, my love, and I like it very much."

"No," he said, very carefully and slowly. "I am not teasing; I am not playing. Give it back to me, if you love me."

"Shroud, why? Have we not been happy? Do I not still taste of red berries and sunlight on long grass?"

"Warmer sunlight and sweeter berries than I ever thought possible. But I am a Selkie. No amount of wishing will make me a Satyr. This is what I am. Selkies stay until they leave, and the instinct for leaving is so powerful in us, far more powerful than the instinct for the sea. I understand that now. It is not the sea that calls us back. What calls is stronger and more inexorable than any current. I long for the sea, yes, my skin is always dry, and I am always thirsty, and I miss the crash and swell of the black waves, but more, I long for the *leaving*. I am restless, I am ready, and the leaving whispers to me at night. It says that I will breathe easier when the air is full of fog and seagulls, that I will breathe easier when I am at the start of a story, rather than at the end."

Tears trickled to my chin. "No, no, I won't give it to you," I whispered.

"Eshkol, I have not looked for my skin for seven years. I have not rifled the thatch of the roof, or pulled up the floorboards. I have not thought of it; I have not checked the hanging wash for a gray scrap. But the leaving will not let me be, and I must answer it. I don't want to." Shroud clenched his fist and for the first time his pale face colored, red and pained. "I don't. I want to stay with you and eat chestnuts and curl my fingers in your fur. But the seal is stronger than the man, and the leaving is stronger than the seal." He spread his hands helplessly. "This is what I am."

"If you don't want to, then don't! I am a Satyr, yet I am hopeless at playing the pipes—we are more than just our bodies."

"It's no good, dearest of all bodies to me. If you do not give it to me, I will find it, and one day you will wake up and I will be gone. I have looked for it for seven days and found nothing, but you are not so good at hiding things that I will not find it one day or another. Please. You're hurting me."

Slowly, I unbuttoned my vest and my belt, and reached into their folds. I drew out the gray skin, warm from lying next to my own.

"I've always had it just here, sweet seal-boy. I wore your skin every day."

Shroud reached across the table and took it from me—I only resisted a little. He touched it with wonder, as though it was woven light studded with stars. "I am not tired anymore, Eshkol," he said, his voice hushed as river rushes.

"Oh," I said, sighing, "then I am happy for you. But I am as tired as an old aspen bent double."

In the morning he was gone, and I went walking in the dew-and-dim to see Grandfather Yew. I lay next to his roots and stroked them, chased off a few squirrels. I didn't cry; I couldn't bear the touch of water on my skin.

I liked him, hummed the Yew. *And I've thought about it some—it's all right about the bark.*



"I WANDERED FOR A WHILE, OUT OF THE FOREST and away from everything. I didn't mean to find the sea, but eventually the soil turned to sand and the air became full of fog and seagulls, and there it was. A dockside beg gar told me of a ship which wanted women for a crew, a magic ship with a red hull and a fox for a captain. I signed on faster than a leopard catching a rabbit in her jaws—Tommy was glad to have me. I never understood what he said about the instinct for leaving till I saw this ship, but once I did, there was no telling me I couldn't have it. The leaving had me, and I went with it, just as my Shroud did. I don't miss him the way I used to—Satyrs aren't made for grieving. But once in a while, when the sea is very calm, I dream of skins, endless skins, like the layers of an onion. But here I am—anything that happens belowdecks on the *Maidenhead* is my territory—and that's not such a bad story to be in the middle of."

The ship suddenly lurched to one side and a strange sizzling sound filled the air. Eshkol leapt from the bunk, her hooves sounding heavily on the floorboards.

"The Boiling Sea!" she cried. "Sigrid, you won't want to miss it! A sight no other crew will ever survive!"

The pair emerged above decks to find a riot of sound and movement. The Arimaspians were leaning over the prow in their eagerness, oblivious to how

difficult it was for the sail-riggers to work around them. One of the lesser men leered at a young Djinn, who flicked her fiery fingers at him and ignited his beard. His companions howled in indignation and beat out the flames.

Tomomo herself stood calmly at the wheel, guiding her ship through the Boiling Sea, which no longer buffeted the sleek craft with waves, but with violent bubbles and hissing steam. The ocean was alive and furious, sizzling against the flanks of the ship, sending up rolling columns of scalding water that caught more than one woman across the face with its blistering spray. At first, most had been fascinated by the suddenly raging sea, but one by one they learned to stay well away from the rails and give their attention only to the lines and sails. The sound of it was deafening—it was like a scream of wind tearing through a child's paper house, crumpling the walls and rafters as it blows.

Sigrid hung back near the stern, leaning over the rails and breathing the steam of the sea. She looked into the horizon, wind whipping her dusky hair into her cheeks, and for a moment, just a moment, she could see, on the edge of the water where the calm met the boil, a gray seal's head bobbing up and down in the surf, barking softly, mournfully, unable to follow.

"Sigrid! Attend me!" Oluwakim hollered from his position at the bow. She turned reluctantly and trotted up to him, standing just behind his group and hoping he would not need her for anything. The King held a long brass spyglass in his fierce black fist, brandishing it like a sword.

"Look! The Hidden Isle! Not very well hidden, of course, but no stupid Griffin hen can hide from the Ocular!" He held out the spyglass to Sigrid with an expression that made it clear he felt he was being extremely generous. She put it to her eye and indeed, a slim line of land was glimmering in the distance, looming larger with each moment that passed. The *Maidenhead* was cutting through the roiling water with incredible speed, hardly slowed at all. Sigrid hoped in vain that the wind would die, that they would not be able to reach the isle and murder poor Quri. But before she knew it they had moored offshore and filled one of the longboats with eager-faced Arimaspians and Long-Eared Tomomo, and Sigrid herself was reluctantly climbing into the crowded craft.

The Hidden Isle was little more than a scrap of sand in the middle of the angry sea. The surf bubbled up onto the white beach, and the drift-wood

scattered along the shore was scalded red as flesh. There might once have been a tower in the center of the patch of earth, but it had crumbled into little more than a jumble of broken rocks. Some of them still stood, one atop the other, so that a piece of a wall could be seen, and the arch of what might have been a window—but no more. The troupe clambered onto solid ground and almost immediately the Arimaspians charged over the dunes with a dreadful cry, having easily sighted the nest of the White Beast on the north end of the strand. Sigrid hung back with her captain.

"You're wondering why I would take these men aboard, when they are only going to render an entire race extinct," Tomomo said gently. "You think it is hard and cruel—but that is what piracy is. We are free women, and so we do not obey the rules everyone bows and scrapes to. If the gold they give us will patch our sails and put wine on our table, we will ferry them. If it turns your stomach, I will leave you on this island and you can make your own way off it."

Sigrid said nothing.

When they arrived at the nest the White Griffin was screeching like a wounded bear and beating her wings against the wave of Arimaspians jabbing their swords and spears at her. She desperately fought to shield her nest, snatching one of the men in her jaws and tearing into his soft belly, hurling another against the jagged ruins—and under her haunches the two women could see three large eggs, blue and white as slabs of sky.

"That's a very inefficient offensive, Oluwa. I thought you and your tribe were expert hunters! Clearly I was misinformed," Tommy hollered. The Griffin hissed at her, bright feathers flying. She was white from the tip of her tail to the crown of her head; even the fur of her lion haunches was pale as a glacier. Only her claws and beak were golden, the rest of her entirely blanched of color, pure as the sandy beach. Her eyes flashed, crackling with panic and despair. Oluwakim seemed to consider for a moment, then nonchalantly signaled to his men. They obeyed instantly, backing away from the rabid creature.

"What would you suggest, sea rat? Will you lend us your beast-cannons? A single broadside could have us a fine Griffin supper in a mere moment—and you your payment," he snapped.

Seeing her opportunity, Sigrid dashed past the adorned hunters and dove into the nest, while the Griffin roared her protests. She spread her skinny body as wide as she could, pitifully trying to block any spear's flight to the beast or the precious eggs. Of course the Griffin towered over her, entirely vulnerable.

"I won't let you kill her!" she screamed.

Both monarchs, the one of the sea and the other of the land, looked at her with amused impatience.

"You are a very bad servant, little girl," Oluwakim observed. He was quite calm—not at all perturbed by the notion of dispatching a child along with a beast.

"Do you really think a creature of that size needs you to shield it?" Tommy asked, grinning mischievously.

"Of course I don't," bellowed the Griffin, her voice echoing over the desolate beach like the flight of a single black bird. "But it's the gesture that counts." She nuzzled Sigrid roughly, a strange kind of reward for her bravery. "So you've come for me, have you, Oluwa? My brother told me you would, one day."

"Was that before or after he quickened your eggs, you barbaric half-breed? Even dogs don't deign to mate brother to sister," he scoffed.

"Don't try to shame me, ape. I know your nest is empty of roosters; what right have you to mock mine, which is not? We have no law against such things—and where was there another male to give me chicks? Thanks to you he was the last."

"I did nothing to him," sneered the Arimaspian. "He was torn into carrion, dumb meat and nothing more." She flinched and stared at the King with such hatred the rest of his companions stepped slightly away from him, expecting a furious attack. "I *saw* it, Quri," he taunted, tapping his golden eye with one dark finger. "I saw them devour your blue brother. They licked their lips and made a feast of him; they threw his bones to their dogs. Why don't you tell us the tale? We have time—I shall kill you before or after; I have no preference. I listened to the sire prattle on like a wind-up toy; I can extend the same courtesy to the dam. Everyone here *loves* to hear tales. Tell them how your brother died the day he lent his color to your eggs."

Quri bent her head in grief, staring at the iridescent colors of her unborn chicks. When she spoke, her voice was thick with anger.

“Not for your pleasure, little king of a little hill, but for the child who put her body between you and my eggs…”



I WAS BORN UNDER THE ROSE DOME OF SHADUKIAM. Alone of all Griffin, a woman carried me in her belly, like a human child, and from her my egg issued, and from her I was born. It is a famous story—I will not repeat it.

My Griffin-mother always told me not to return to Shadukiam, the city of my birth. It is a wicked place, she said, a man who keeps his knife hidden when others show theirs plain. I wanted to obey; I wanted to be happy on the heights of Nuru, happy as Jin was, nestled under our mother's wing with the moon on his cerulean feathers.

But I could not. I was drawn back and back again to the strange, sweet smell of decaying roses, to the mildewed walls which tapered into diamond turrets, to the dark gutters swollen with rain. I was drawn back to Giota, to the scent of her, which smelled more like mother to me than the soft golden straw of the nest. I followed that smell, the smell of blood and violets crushed underfoot, the smell of Giota's mouth. I did not remember, exactly, being inside her, but my heart knew that it had once beat beside another heart. I followed the memory of my heartbeat through the silver streets of Shadukiam, the lacy shadows cast by the diamond turrets, until I found her, the woman who gave me birth, sleeping on a rubbish heap outside a ramshackle inn. My throat was tight and I lay next to her, covering her body with my wings, weeping tears of gold into her hair.

I flew over the plains between Nuru and the city many times. Giota was always pleased to see me, though we rarely spoke. We pressed our heads

together in the shade of wide-armed trees; we nuzzled each other and picked leaves, I from her ever-growing hair, she from my pelt. It was rarely necessary for us to speak, only to be together, in secret, mother and daughter who could never call each other by those names.

Jin did not understand, of course he did not, who never grew in the womb of a woman, but he never betrayed me, and my true mother thought me hers and hers alone until the day she was slaughtered and her beak cut from her face to decorate an Arimaspian head. We hid ourselves away in the blinding cliffs, for we were still young and could not defend ourselves against so many. Jin covered my face with his wings as the last screams of our mother echoed through the crystalline crater.

On that day I left him to the nest that was his, and went into Shadukiam to console myself on the breast of Giota. I could not stay under the Rose Dome—I was far too large to comfortably live in a city—but I built my nest of cedar and camphor outside that blooming arch, and each day one of us went to the other to hold our quiet communion. We were happy together, for a while.

I wept the day she forged her chain and beat the bolts into the wall of the great Basilica. I did not understand. I could not bear the thought of never sleeping again with her tiny heart beating against mine in my nest of red woods. She tried to tell me it would be no different, that I could still come to her in this strange churchyard—which was so near to the place where she bore me. But I knew, I knew it would be different, that something was ending before my eyes and I could not stop it. I stared into her dark eyes, my own lost in tears.

"Am I not enough?" I whispered hoarsely. "Can I not make you happy?"

"Oh, my darling," she answered, her mouth muffled by her rumpled, wet dress. She put her hands into my feathers as I longed for her to do. "You have always made your Giota happy. But I am not a Griffin; I have allegiances which are not to gold or egg. And I have this duty to perform."

"I have no gold to watch over. I have only you." I tried to press my head against hers, but she turned away, opening the hidden seam in her black frock so that the mouth in her belly—the mouth that bore me—could speak freely.

"You will, Quri. You will have a clutch of eggs and a nest of gold, as all Griffins do, one day. We must each tend to the talismans of our people—you to

your gold and Giota to her wall."

"You have never told me the name of your people. I know nothing of you, of your ways and your blood. If you are leaving me for a wall and a chain, at least tell me why; tell me what burden calls to you from what tribe to do this thing. Tell me who you are!"

She grunted and leaned against the crumbling, moss-covered wall, holding her belly in her hands as she had done on the few days when she had spoken to me for longer than a few affectionate sighs—days I remember now like feasts, holidays, festivals of her voice. She turned her lipless face to the sky and shut her black eyes, and the tongue in her belly began to tell its tale…



I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE THINKING. THAT SOMEWHERE in the world there is a race of people who carry their mouths in their bellies; that somewhere there is a tribe in which I would seem unremarkable.

There is not.

I am only a woman, born from a woman, sister to women. Alas, women were rare in the wild, honey-colored expanse of my home—vast grass-swept expanses of land spotted with tree and horse. Thus, my caravan was always small. Sons were born easily, brothers quickly had, husbands too numerous for the few wives. Each woman had many—men fought for the honor of marrying into her bed. The women born were always powerful, almost to a girl a witch or a warrior. The birth of a daughter was celebrated by three nights of feasting on the meat of skinny hawks and blue-bellied lizards. The birth of twin daughters was considered a miracle sent by the blessed Stars.

Triplets occurred once in a generation, when the Snake-Star aligned with the Harpoon-Star, and the light of the Pierced Serpent fell on the yellow grass. These star-born triplets are the emblem of the caravan—we were known for them; they were prized; without these sacred births we were no more than a ragtag band of horse-traders peddling chicken feet as love charms from town to town.

The triplets are called the Sorella, and I am the youngest of mine—I was born a full minute after my sisters. We are special, we are sacred: The oldest of each triad carries her eyes in her belly, the middle her ears, and the youngest

her mouth. The organs are erased from their right places, but not gouged out, not torn. It is simply as though some god passed her hand over our faces and washed away our eyes, our ears, our mouth. We were the Seer, the Listener, and the Speaker.

We were Pangiota, Legiota, and Magiota. We were sisters, and with one mind we guided the path of our caravan—for Legiota saw the path, Magiota heard the Stars' commands, and I spoke the path. We could not lie; we could not guide our people falsely. If the Sorella were consulted, only I could reply, and I could not fail to answer truly, to tell the tale of what my sisters saw and heard. We were more than an oracle: Our faces were the valleys on which the Star-gods walked. We braided our hair into sacred habits, for our bodies were the vessels of the Stars' light, and no woven cloth could be more holy. It was whispered that the Sorella were the same women in each generation, that the spirits of one set of sisters simply stepped into the bodies of the next. I know nothing of that—I am Pangiota; I have always been. More than that no one can tell.

I often envied my sisters. After all, I only reported what they told me, what Legiota saw and what Magiota heard. I, too, wanted to turn a secret ear to the sky and hear the white-hot words of the Stars pouring into me like burning honey. I, too, wanted to see the path of truth extending from my lashes like a golden ribbon. But I could only open my hair like a curtain and let my hidden mouth speak. The gods touched my sisters, they did not touch me. I used to pray that we could trade powers, that I could, just once, be the woman who laid out her body under the Stars and let their light spill onto her belly.

Children make prayers so thoughtlessly, building them up like sand castles —and they are always surprised when suddenly the castle becomes real, and the iron gate grinds shut.

One day, which was not unlike any other day on the steppes, when the honey cakes boiled in their pans and men shot lazy arrows at raccoons and voles who were little more than little bundles of dry bones, Legiota and Magiota called me to them in our secret place. We crouched in a cavern of black rock hidden in the flank of the orange-and-white-banded cliffs which marked the edges of the grassland, of our home. In the shadows, the sound of water dripping from the stone ceiling made us sleepy and calm—but that day

my sisters were awake and nervous as foxes that scent a huntsman. They had unbraided their hair from crown to toe, and sat naked in the cave, their bellies displayed like jewels.

"I have seen a new path," Legiota whispered.

"I have heard the footsteps of the Stars diverting from their courses," Magiota added, clutching my hands in hers. I realized suddenly that they were frightened.

"There will be no more Sorella after us. The caravan is dying. There will be more daughters soon than ever were born to us, and mothers will no longer pray for them. There will be no more triple births. The Harpoon-Star has refused to pluck out the eyes, ears, and mouths of any other daughters, and the Snake-Star will not plant them in other wombs. They will give us generations of daughters as compensation, but all of them will be plain. They will not be born with power; they will have to wrest it from this cave, which is deeper dug in the earth than even we had guessed. We will be forgotten, and when the last gray-haired grandmother who remembers us bleeds her blackest blood onto the earth, the caravan will hunger, and thirst, and die."

Legiota spoke matter-of-factly, as though she spoke of the average rainfall on the flats. "A man has been born whose great-great-grandson will murder the Snake-Star, and there is no longer any path the Serpent of Heaven can take which will not lead to her death. She has told me this, and she mourns herself under the black veil of the sky. The Sorella were her handmaids while she lived; we cannot serve her when she is dead—she has told me that she will take other Stars as her own, little snakes to be her pallbearers, and remove herself to a temple far removed from the cursed city, to wait for her doom to come on heavy feet." Magiota's eyes filled with tears, and they dripped onto the shell-like ears in her belly.

"Pangiota, my sister, I am afraid of death," Legiota rasped.

"Why should you fear to die?" I asked. "If this will not come to pass until the prime of the grandson, we will not see the Serpent perish from the sky. We will not see the new handmaids take our place. We are safe, if no longer blessed."

My sisters exchanged glances, and Legiota passed her hand over the smooth expanse where her eyes might have been. "You do not understand. We two are her handmaids. We will go into seclusion with her, and give our strength to

hers, our sight and our hearing to the little snakes, so that in five generations, her light will be so great that she will rise again from her own murder."

My eyes drooped and my shoulders fell. I touched my sisters' bellies with affection and sorrow. "And I am not to go with you."

"Pangiota." Legiota's eyes softened and creased their corners, trying to make her words as gentle as she could. "You are the least of us. Never has the Serpent-Star seen you or touched you; she only knows of you as our sister. You only speak, and she does not care for human speech. For the Sorella, you are vital; for the Serpent, you do not exist. And the Stars have determined that the Sorella should be broken."

These words hit me like a bellow of hot wind—but I knew them to be true. I was nothing, only a mouthpiece, a mute pipe into which my sisters' breath flowed. I bent my head and nodded, knowing how small I was in their presence. Magiota threw her arms around my waist and pressed her fluttering ears to my lips. It was an intimacy we three rarely shared, the touch of lash to lip and lobe.

"We will go; we love our god as we love you. But we have decided together that we cannot let the Sorella pass from the world. We have sat vigil in this cave, searching out a path which would allow us to stay with you, to stay Sorella, and to birth another three which will carry on our memory past the death of the Star. No caravan should be left blind and deaf, mute and helpless. And we have found a way." Magiota smiled and drew a small knife from her skirts, a curving silver blade with a handle of bone.

"What has been ours will be yours, Pangiota. We will cut out our eyes and ears and give them to you to swallow. The power will be passed to you, all the Sorella in one body. And you will leave the caravan, you will leave the horses whose smell you know like your own, and go into a city covered in a dome of roses, and there you will wait for the beast to cry out to you. I have seen this already; I have seen you walking under white petals." Legiota's eyes gleamed from her navel like green torches in the dark.

"You will swallow the child of the beast as you will swallow our flesh, and bear the creature within you like your own daughter. In this way two races will be saved, and the three of us will be always together, beyond the death of the

Star. We will go into seclusion, and you will go into the wicked city, and give birth to us over again." Magiota stroked her ears quietly.

"I do not understand," I cried, unwilling to devour my own sisters, terrified of their strange words.

"Of course not, of course not, but you will. Prophecy is such a difficult thing, but we know that there is no other way to preserve the Sorella, and we will not refuse the call of the Serpent."

Oh, how I wept while I watched them! Naked as animals, they performed this surgery before my eyes: Magiota seized the knife and plunged it into her belly—it entered her with the sickening slick sound of a finger passed through running water—and slowly cut her sacred ears from her stomach, sweating and crying out quietly as she worked. She tried to keep her smile, so as not to frighten me, but I could not bear the sight; I retched in a corner of the cave while her whimpering sounded in my own ears. Legiota carved out her eyes next, never allowing herself to moan, but her breath was ragged as a torn dress, and her hands when I turned back to them were shiny and wet with blood.



They placed the lumps of pitiful flesh in front of me like servants laying out an exquisite cake for their lady. Both still bled, yet they smiled and smiled, unbraiding my hair with almost maternal care, just as they used to do when we were girls together. They pulled the long sheaves of hair aside and put their arms around me, cradling my body with their own and stroking my face with sticky red hands, urging me to swallow them, to close my eyes and do it before the organs cooled and died. I screamed and screamed in their arms, my voice echoing in the rocky chamber until it seemed as though we were surrounded by a chorus of shrieking ghosts. They hushed me and held me close, and finally through my screams I seized the bloody clumps of my sisters and pressed them into my mouth, gagging, swallowing, gagging again. I forced it down my belly-throat, and my tears mingled with their blood until all I could taste was salt.

It was quiet afterwards.

I lay on the cool rock and they lay over me, blood drying on our skin like paint. We lay like lovers, tangled together in pain and sorrow. Legiota pushed the matted hair from my ear and said:

"Now we will never leave you; you are all of us, and you will go on. We will leave the world; you will go into its steaming heart. But remember that you are always Sorella. It is your duty to guide the caravan, the ramshackle train of kindred that crawls over the face of the earth, scrabbling at the dirt for fruit, scrabbling at the skies for revelation. When the beast has gone from the city and you have done your duty by her, you must be Sorella for all the caravans, and perform our duty for them. They will come to you, and you must see for them, and hear for them, and speak for them. Cut your hair when you go into the city, wear their threads and not your own, but when you have finished your maternity, when you are ready, braid it again into our holy dress. We will be with you, inside you, and we will love you for all the days of this body."

With these words, Legiota and Magiota laid their heads on my breasts like daughters and died, their spirits, their light, rising like steam to join the Serpent in seclusion.

I wept alone in the dark.



GIOTA'S EYES WERE DRY AND DULL.

"By the time I reached the diamond turrets of Shadukiam, I could hear their voices in me; I could hear the Stars singing in their choirs and I could see the path stretching out before me like a golden ribbon. I was not Pangiota any longer; I was only Giota, all of us and none of us. It is difficult to keep it straight—sometimes I seem to speak to them, sometimes to myself, sometimes to the dead air. I have done my duty by the beast, by the Griffin, and now I must do my duty by my sisters, I must be the Sorella of Shadukiam, the Anchorite, the Oracle."

I stared dumbfounded at her, humbled by the expanse of what I had not guessed about her. "But why must you chain yourself to the wall? You can be an oracle anywhere; there are towers full of them! You could stay in my nest and the folk of the city could come out to you."

Giota looked at me with wild eyes, vulnerable as a lamb beneath a wolf's teeth. Though I knew her mouth was free and wide in her belly, the featureless skin where it should have been made it seem as though she was gagged with some terrible rope.

"I am so frightened, Quri. If I do not do this thing now I will not stay. I will go with you and I will abandon my sisters. All my life I prayed to have their power, and I am so frightened of it now. Do not begrudge me this: It is who I am; just as you will one day have your gold and your eggs to look after, I must look after them." She raised her hand to stroke my face—such a small hand!—

and then lowered it to peeling off her dress. “Help me, my daughter. Help me braid my hair again.”

I lowered my head to those long, coarse strands, their familiar smell overwhelming me, and lifted one bundle of hair over another with my beak, slowly, clumsily, weaving her habit down to her ankles. My tears fell onto the strange fabric, and left great golden stains on the braids.

“Mother”—and with the word a swollen river burst in my heart—“will I truly have gold of my own and eggs to tend? I cannot really believe it; I cannot believe that the race of Griffins will go on. If you are an oracle now, if you are the Anchorite, then you must tell me the truth; you cannot reassure me with lies.”

“Quri, your brother lives, and while he does, you have a duty to perform as much as I do. He will quicken your eggs, and you will have three chicks to warm with the fur of your haunches. Go, return to the Red Mountain, and find him.”

With this Giota clamped her chains around her wrists and took her place at the wall. I left her, though my bones mourned, and turned to the plains of Nuru, to find my brother’s blue plumage again and obey my mother, as good children do.

In the Garden

It was still dark. The sky hung heavy above them like a nomad's tent, lanterned with stars and buffeted by quiet winds. The boy's head lay in the girl's lap—he had at first thought himself brave to lie thus, but she seemed to welcome it, and tousled his hair with a nervous hand.

"I'll be clever tonight," he whispered, "and I will not be caught."

The girl laughed like rain trickling through palm leaves.

"I will! I will not let your tale keep me until light breaks the sky like a pitcher! I will leave now, while the stars are still bright, and return to the blacksmith. Then Dinarzad will know nothing, and I will be able to come all the earlier tomorrow!"

The boy ran off happily, past the stately rows of cypress, back towards the minarets of the Palace, rising into the dark sky like a second grove of trees.

But the next evening found the boy not roaming free in the Garden, but curled in the corner of the stall, pouting. He drew his knees up to his chin and scowled. He had been lying that way for a long while when he saw a shape crawling towards him through the secret door. It was the girl, hay decorating her black hair like a crown of gold. He started in joy and dragged her with eager hands out of the passage and into his stall.

"I was not as clever as I thought," he confessed. "Dinarzad did not discover me, but the fat Cook saw me sneak in and swore to tell if she ever caught sight

of me out of doors again. I could not decide whether to go out again—I was trying to think, trying to be brave as Sigrid on the pirate ship, to go to my Griffin no matter what. But I could not decide." He blushed, though he hated to do it.

"It doesn't matter. You are easy to find," the girl whispered, smiling with half her mouth. The two settled into the corner of the stall while the sorrel snorted and stomped softly, nuzzling at his salt lick.

"Now, the white Griffin was despondent for a long while after Giota embraced her wall," she began, her voice lilting like the sway of rushes in a summer storm. "She could not be consoled, and flew in circles around the Basilica, crowing in grief like an albatross. And this sound, though not so piercing as her mother's shrieks had once been, were carried gently on the wind to the red peaks of Nuru, and there Jin the blue Griffin heard his sister's sorrow echoing for years upon years. So when the Monopod climbed upon his back to go down into Shadukiam, Jin was glad, for the last two creatures he loved in all the world would be waiting for him under the dome of roses…"



I DID NOT KNOW MY BROTHER WAS COMING, BUT something in my lion's heart woke and began to stalk back and forth within me. Something in my eagle's heart rustled and tested the air with its wings. For days before his turquoise shape appeared, a blurry spot in the sky, I waited, though I did not know for what.

And then he came, carrying some misshapen creature on his back. We stood together before the Basilica, before the twisted roots of the high-arching door, dwarfing the parishioners who were so well trained to avoid looking at monsters while they passed in and out of the holy place. Monsters were part of the other Shadukiam, the shadow city which found its sacred space behind the church in the body of a twisted, mouthless creature. The pious Shaduki were very skilled at ignoring the other city.

The creature, which I could see was a Monopod with a rather unimpressive foot once he had extricated himself from my brother's feathers, stood awkwardly by while Jin pressed his head to mine, and we nuzzled each other in silence, stroking necks with our beaks and closing our eyes against the other's familiar scent. Unbidden, crooning, burbling cries rose from our long-separate throats. The Monopod cleared its hideous throat pointedly. Without looking at it, Jin barked:

"Go, Monopod. Bring the Yi-woman to me by midnight, and I will do your deed." His eyes stayed locked on mine, and the little man hopped away.

“Giota is not my mother anymore,” I croaked, the sadness of it still able to break my throat in half. Jin only shrugged his azure shoulders.

“She never truly was, my sister. You ask so much from her.”

“You haven’t seen what she did to herself! Go to her and see it, see how she has beggared herself into filth and squalor! Go and ask her to tell your fortune —that’s all she is now, a stupid gypsy reading the Stars for signs!”

And so we went to her together. Reunions are wearying to relate—they only matter to those reunited. The complicated embrace of two giants and a slight creature clad in her own hair is too delicate and careful to describe. We loved her; we still love her; we held her like a chick between us. She rolled her black eyes up to us, parting the hair over her belly to speak.

“I know you do not wish to hear it, but it is time—there are eggs waiting to be hatched, and my pretty blue boy will not live out the night.”

Jin did not stir, but caressed Giota’s cheek tenderly with a long ink-blue forefeather. I started, stricken. “I wish I had come only to see you, Quri,” he whispered, “but I am here for the stump-leg, and I am meant to kill a thing tonight. Whenever you murder, you pay for it—thus do we pay for the Griffin who murdered horse and Arimaspian, and they pay for the Griffin they kill.”

“Go now, into the sky,” Giota rasped urgently. “If these can be called my grandchildren, so be it—but they must be born. There is no one else to quicken her.” She climbed from our embrace back to her mossy wall, and turned her face from us, stroking her lips and muttering softly. Jin looked at me calmly, with shame or joy or despair I could not tell. But he rose up into the sky with a single stroke of his wings, and I followed.

How can I tell you of the mating of Griffin? We are not birds; we are not cats, but we spiral up to the bellies of the clouds as birds do, and we bite into each other’s throats and shoulders as cats do. No one had told us how; no one had told us we should not. Our eyes blazed gold and black, our fur bristled and our hackles rose. We snapped at each other and growled deep in our chests; we wrestled in the air like angels. We circled each other in the blinding blue and white of heaven, and he sunk his teeth into the back of my neck, and I cried out like the sound of bells shattering, and we wept as we came together under the sun and the thousand roses of Shadukiam.

When we descended, the stars had broken the skin of the sky, and we were bloodied and bruised. The Monopod stood waiting at the great door of the church—at his side was another of his kind, a female. Its skin was pockmarked and sallow, almost translucent, like petals wilting. It leered at us, revealing tiny teeth, jagged and sharp. I sucked in my breath—it was clear that a Yi was lurking under that skin.

"Do I get the male or the breeding cat?" it hissed, grinning horribly at us.

"It was the only way," the first Monopod said pleadingly. "It would not come unless I promised it a body."

The Yi licked its cratered lips. "We have never managed a Griffin. You all fix it so that you die alone on wretched beaches and boil your blood in the desert. We are curious; what will it be like to fly with those wings?"

Jin looked at me for a moment and whispered thickly, "It is like dying."

Then his dark shoulders shifted imperceptibly. He moved so quickly I saw only a blue rush, and sunk his talon into the eye of the decaying Yi. It screamed with such violence my ears ached to burst, a terrible sound—metal grinding on metal or the squeals of pigs and rats. The eye-white around my brother's talon puddled and sagged, dribbling onto the polished courtyard like spoiled milk. Finally, there was little left but a pile of half-liquid bones, and these the Monopod gathered to his chest lovingly, weeping with thanks.

"I will bury them properly, I will say the words of the High-Growing Moss above her grave, and every year after on this day. Thank you, Jin-of-the-Red-Peak, thank you, thank you. You do not know how much you have given me." He bowed many times, bobbing ridiculously like a toy. I breathed relief; this horrible transaction was done.

And suddenly the courtyard was full of white shapes, panting like a pack of dogs and baring their teeth, yelping and snapping. I had never seen Yi, truly, only heard of them, and certainly I had never seen so many, and so many in the late days of their possession, when the bodies mirrored the surface of the moon—green-white, scarred, tight and shining like masks of bone. They had lost all semblance of the civilized demeanor they liked to affect, and stood around us howling and slavering like starving wolves. They clapped their cadaverous hands together with a gesture between menace and joy; bits of

their fingers flew off the bone, thudding to the pavement like dough dropped from bakers' spoons.

Their speech was a terrible chorus of hissing and smacking of tongues, and they did not speak at once or separately, but their sentences floated from creature to creature, as though none could finish a thought without his brothers and sisters.

"How dare—"

"You touch us? You are—"

"Hated of Moon, we are her best—"

"Beloved children! We will gnaw your wing bones—"

"We will slurp the flesh—"

"From your knuckles! Half-breed mongrel—"

"You had no—"

"Right!"

Jin stepped slowly away from them, his hind paws clattering on the stone courtyard. But their slavering only increased, and a few—of shapes too strange to guess at—closed the circle behind him. The Monopod was pulling at my pelt, his great black eyes pleading.

"Come away, come away! They will never let him go now. If you run, they will not notice you."

"But his body! I cannot let them have his body—all this was for your own wretched woman and you would let it happen over again to my brother?"

"This is not a possession," he mumbled grimly. "It is a mob. They will not take his body; they will tear it into pieces. For them, to lose a single member of their tribe is like losing a leg at the knee. This is revenge, and when they are done, there will be nothing left but a few drops of blood for tomorrow's churchgoers to wipe off their shoes. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I knew this might happen, but I had to help my Tova, I had to get her free. I promise, there is nothing you can do, even with all your strength. If you killed all of these, with their last breaths they would scream for their siblings—and they would come, from the deepest cracks and alleys of the city. There is no limit to their numbers. If you want to live to birth your chicks"—he blushed slightly and looked away, consumed, I surmised, by some tradition of propriety towards breeding females among his people—"the sky is the only safe place. Go, find

some forgotten strand, and hide your young away. While the scent of my Tova is in the air, they will be frenzied, and forget you. When it has passed, they will calm again, and they will not give you the mercy of vivisection. They will take your body and your babes will be born gray and dead, their first cries mocking laughter."

I stared at the hateful little man, who had sold us to these scavenging horrors. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to put my claws through his eyes as he had begged Jin to do to that creature. It would have felt wonderful, I imagined, and his blood would be hot.

But Giota would be ashamed of me. She would turn away from me, and forget my name, and my children would never know her. She had known that Jin was near death—it must mean something, it must be more important than a mere balancing of scales after a murder.

I leaned into his face, and he did not blink. Quick as a tailor tearing her stitches, I snapped my head to one side and tore his left ear from his head and spat it onto the ground. His blood, hot as I had imagined, dripped from my beak, and I hissed through the red mess at our betrayer, before flapping my long wings—once, twice, three times, and lifting into the night.

I circled overhead, high enough to be safe from the pack of scarified Yi, who quivered with excitement and lust. There was no chance for my brother to follow my flight with his eyes, to know that I was safe before he died, a mercy that stories like ours always allow. It was not allowed to us.

I watched as they lunged forward and sank two dozen sets of diamond teeth into my Jin's flanks. He screamed, like a wind through broken glass, and kept screaming until one of the pale, bony things caught his perfect blue throat in its jaws, and he died with a wet, strangling whimper.

I watched as they ate him in the sickly light of their Moon.



Quri stroked the sand with her glossy paw. "All my life, I never gave the Arimaspian problem any thought. How could I, when I was so busy adoring a human woman and bearing these poor eggs? I watched Jin die; I watched him become food for ghosts and wraiths whose blood was moonlight. I did not think about silly men who liked gold enough to kill an entire race for it. I came here; I laid my eggs all the autumn long in a dry patch of sand, and covered them with the fur of my body. Years passed—a Griffin's egg is a slow thing growing. Gold washed up in the waves, slowly, flecks and nuggets and slivers. It sparkled in the sand; it added to the sand. This island is half made of gold. Of course I didn't know that when I came; I only wanted a place to rest where no one would ever find me. The Boil would protect me. How could I expect that in the midst of boiling waters an island of gold would rise like a whale's fin? Slowly, I began to find it beautiful, and draw the larger pieces together to make a real nest for my chicks. Slowly, I began to see it as all Griffin before me had seen it—the color of the sun, burnished and burning, light and life and fire sparkling inside it so fiercely that it gives off a quiet heat that only we can feel. I began to love it. And still I did not think of the Arimaspians, the creatures who killed my mother, the reason we cannot hoard as much of the precious stuff as we wish, because it would draw the killers like bees to summer-honey. Until I saw a ship's mast, impossibly, on the roiling horizon, I never thought of it. Then I remembered; then I was ashamed at my naïveté. I wanted only to help my chicks break their eggs and teach them to fly; I wanted only to bring

Giota under cover of night three perfect children, who would nuzzle against her neck, and press their warm heads to hers. I forgot that I am not a Griffin, I am only quarry—the last quarry."

Sigrid's eyes were full of tears, but they did not fall. She knuckled them away and fought the urge to touch the Griffin's beautiful fur, which glimmered coldly like snow over a silver statue. She just stared up at the fabulous monster, whose eagle head was silhouetted against the clouded sun. The gold of her beak flashed—and indeed, Sigrid could see answering flashes in the sand: Here and there and here again, a gold fleck gleamed among the grains.

Into her thoughts the deep drum-voice of Oluwakim burst like the flight of an arrow.

"Well. She's an abomination and a coward. I thought we'd come to find a real beast, and instead, we only find this poor heap of garbage, last bedraggled pigeon of a race of pigeons."

He shrugged, his great black muscles rippling like continents drifting in the night. His men had not moved, standing frozen as blocks of wood. In all this stillness, it would have been easy to miss the sudden rush of movement that snapped through the crowd, but Sigrid saw it: Oluwakim reached for his sleek, thin dagger and clutched it in his fist for only a moment before throwing it, almost casually, between Sigrid's arm and her ribs, directly at the heart of the White Griffin.

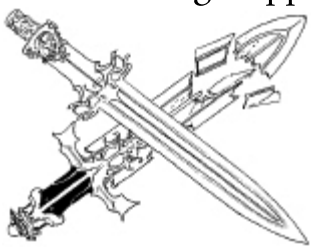
And as soon as the knife had left his hand, a second knife buried itself deep in his back, so that the dying cry of the King sounded in harmony beneath the last keening of the White Beast. Both bodies slumped forward and spilled the blackest blood of their hearts into the golden sand.

Sigrid cried out, and even in her mourning, she searched for the source of the second knife. Her eyes darted over the wretched beach, scouring it for an assassin. Finally, she seized upon black-haired Tomomo, who leaned casually against a skinny, starved palm tree, one muscled leg crossed over the other.

Standing next to her was a woman who might have been the twin of the dead King. Her hair was as long, and as braided with glowering gold. Her skin was as burnished black, the color of shadows within shadows. And where the King's golden eye had been, she carried an eye of beryl, green and blue, shot

through with white. At her waist were at least a dozen knives, all of gold, hanging still as bells without clappers.

As Sigrid stared in wonder, Tomomo took the dark woman's hand in hers and kissed it in a genteel fashion. The two women smiled at each other, and the stranger took her hand from the captain, striding towards the corpse of Oluwakim with a grim face, her lips so tight that the thinnest thread could not pass between them. She stood over the body for a moment, her breathing harsh and ragged. Then, in one savage movement, she braced her sandaled foot against the King's massive shoulder and ripped the golden eye from his skull. The Arimaspians howled their outrage, but at a glance from the woman, they fell silent. Solemnly, she removed the beryl eye from its socket and replaced it with the golden one. The blood of the King dripped from the eye like tears.



"Tommy!" Sigrid cried, her limbs so frozen in shock and grief that she had not even left the great nest. "What is happening? What have you done?"

The captain left her tree and joined the other woman at the corpse of the King. She knelt and examined the body, plucking a few choice pieces of gold from his hair.

"Sigrid, this is what piracy is," she said ruefully, never looking up from the corpse, which she still combed for treasure. "Oluwakim gave us a great deal of money to chase down the poor Griffin. Oluwafunmike gave us more. We hid her away in the hold—not difficult. The *Maidenhead* is quite as remarkable belowdecks as she is above, as you've seen. She hoped, I think, that her father would only take an egg, and not kill the Griffin. It is sad that trust in one's parents is so often misplaced. But it is not our place to take sides in dynastic squabbles, even"—she raised her eyes to meet Oluwafunmike's, her gaze full of affection—"if one side clearly has the lion's share of virtue."

The princess scowled at her father's corpse and retrieved her knife. "Our people can no longer allow our entire race to be exalted by the murder of the Griffin. I take the Ocular now, and begin a new dynasty. This eye, this last of all eyes, will be passed from heir to heir, and never again will we rip our gold from the breasts of innocent beasts. The end to this sad circus was worth whatever I had to pay Tomomo—and worth bearing the presence of pirates." She jostled the captain's shoulder with a large and comradely fist.

"But this is who we are, daughter of the Oluwa," one of the Arimaspians protested. "Without the Griffin hunt, we are but nomads on the sea of the steppes. You will destroy our spirit! The Eye blessed *us*!"

"Can you not see? The Griffin are all dead. There is no hunt, whether I declare it or not. But if you would argue with me, or challenge my Ocular, you will find yourself as dead and rotting as my father. If I do not fear to sink my knife in his back, please believe I will not hesitate to bury it in yours." The man fell into sullen silence, and Oluwafunmike shook her head in sorrow. "They are all dead, son of the Ofira. Dead and cold as winter in the great desert. The Eye blessed us, yes, but we have not been worthy of its Gaze."

As if to answer her, a cascade of sound echoed suddenly over the beach. A quick, rustling noise could be heard, and it deepened into a cracking, clawing cacophony, like wood splintering under a silver axe. Tomomo and the princess started like pheasants in an autumn field, trying to discern the source. The Arimaspians looked suddenly ashen and fearful, as though they expected the ghost of their King to appear and punish them for submitting to his daughter. But Sigrid understood immediately: The eggs beneath her, still nestled in the golden nest, were hatching, and all at once, first of all the things which should not have been. Their marbled blue and white surfaces fractured like sapphire bones, and the last of the glittering golden yolk dribbled out.

Out of the cerulean ruins of the eggshells rose shakily three infant Griffin—two so deeply blue they were almost black, and one whose feathers shone whiter than the first snow in the first winter of the world. They were the size of wildcats, and power already rippled beneath their colored skins. They shook themselves like pigeons, spattering Sigrid's face with shimmering yolk droplets. There was no sound on the windswept beach, no sound but the wind

battering the shoulders of a dozen people, none of whom dared to move or speak. The silence was unbroken, untouched, a block of obsidian.

Then the keening began. The newborn Griffin turned their delicate heads to the brooding sky and shrieked, their throats ululating with a terrible cry, like claws rending a mirror into ribbons. None could bear the sound—the Arimaspian horde fell weeping to the sand, scratching at their aching ears. Sigrid alone was not afraid, and the sound which to the others, even Tomomo and her princess, was a horror, was to her the simple and beautiful sound of birds singing up the sun. She crawled to the howling children and tentatively put out her arms to them. They quieted immediately and curled themselves into her small brown hands, snuffling at her to catch her scent, and still weeping softly.

It was then that Sigrid saw it, and her mouth hung open like a broken door in dismay and wonder.

The Griffin were deformed, misshapen. The larger of the two blue lion-birds had no eyes where they ought to shine—they blinked instead from his downy chest. The chest of the smaller creature bore two tiny holes: the ears of an eagle. And the white had no beak. Sigrid gently touched the pale bird's breast, in which a human mouth opened and closed weakly, its pink lips shining with golden tears.

"What's wrong with them?" Oluwafunmike asked, creeping forward to study the bizarre arrangement of their features. Tomomo inched tentatively forward beside her friend.

Sigrid shook her head softly, and for a moment, she seemed almost an Arimaspian, so coated was her long hair in golden yolk. She spoke in hushed tones, almost in the tenor of a prayer. "They are the Sorella. The new Sorella. Don't you see? When Giota carried the Griffin within her, she must have passed her sisters, and some sliver of herself, into the White Beast. And now the last Griffin are bound to the last Sorella—and Griffin are bound to humans."

The birds mewled helplessly and climbed into Sigrid's lap. The blue siblings began to pick at her vest, pulling at the rough stitches with their beaks. They tore at the cloth eagerly, in a fury, and soon Sigrid was left in the dead Griffin's nest with no more to hide her nakedness than the leather wrappings she had

used to bind her breasts. She began to cry in shame, tears trickling down her sand-spattered face, trying to cover her deformity with her thin arms. But the Griffin were not satisfied. The white infant pushed her head under Sigrid's arms—patiently, without violence—and severed the leather straps with a single pass of her glittering talon.

Sigrid suppressed a wracking sob; her three breasts were suddenly exposed, and all the unfortunate spectators of the Griffin's beach were witness to her freakish body. There was nowhere she could look where she did not meet the eyes of a near-stranger gawking at her bare flesh. She pulled at the ruined wrappings uselessly. Yet even then, she was not afraid of the clustered birds. They pressed nearer to her, cooing affectionately, even purring with pleasure. Her breasts were suddenly heavy, and she could feel the skin which had never seen the sun stretch and tighten strangely.

The white Griffin laid itself against her and nuzzled her ear, clucking and chirruping gently. She wrapped her long neck around Sigrid's, and with infinite gentleness, her human mouth opened to suckle at the rightmost breast. Her blue brothers hungrily followed suit, fastening their beaks onto the second and third breasts. They were too rough at first, unused to human women, and bit her tender skin with their greedy beaks.

Sigrid put her arms around the three infants in awe, her tears flowing like streams from hidden mountains, falling to mingle with the blood the starving beasts had drawn, and finally with the milk which rushed freely from her body to feed the last of all Griffin.

Quietly, like a clock beginning to chime, Saint Sigrid of the Nest began to laugh.



"That was the first miracle of Saint Sigrid," the great bald woman said as the last red rays of the sun faded like drying blood into the horizon. The light seemed to slide along her tattoos and puddle on her broad face. "The others you will learn as you ascend the Tower—the Miracle of the Beard, the Miracle of the Waterless Sea, the Miracle of the Sacking of Amberabad."

"What?" I cried. "How can you tell me only part of a story? Did Sigrid stay to mother the Griffin or return to the ship with Long-Eared Tomomo and live her life as a pirate? Did Oluwafumike keep the Ocular? Was there war? Did the Griffin survive? I have heard they are extinct—are they not? Are they hidden in some aerie no man has seen?"

"Stories," the green-eyed Sigrid said, unperturbed, "are like prayers. It does not matter when you begin, or when you end, only that you bend a knee and say the words. And when we tell Saint Sigrid's story, we open ourselves to her—we cannot close ourselves, even if the story must continue on another day. Each miracle of the Saint is guarded by the women on one floor of the Tower. Should you choose to study with us, you will ascend physically as you become enlightened by the example of Sigrid." The great woman rose then and snuffed out the lantern at the door of the Tower.

"At least tell me how she died. Was it a very heroic death? Did she die saving the Griffin, or her shipmates? Surely a woman's death is a thing which all may know."

The Sigrid laughed. “A woman’s death is the most precious thing she owns. But I will tell you, if you have decided that our Tower is to be your home and your mother for all your days.”

“I have,” I answered breathlessly. Surely these women who possessed such tales were the strongest and wisest of all possible women.

“Saint Sigrid of the Nest disappeared in her fiftieth year. Tomomo, though an excellent Captain, was not indefatigable. She eventually retired and passed the helm of her ship to Sigrid, her most beloved monster. Yet, some years hence, the *Maidenhead* was lost at sea, devoured by the Echeneis, a sea monster whose sheer size beggars the mind. It is said that whole cities could fit within its belly, and that its hide is like the shell of a turtle, impervious to all spears. It is the color of the sea itself, so that a ship may be swallowed before her captain is even alerted to the presence of the beast, though its girth mocks even the Griffin. This is the thing that swallowed the Saint of the Boiling Sea. All hands were lost.”

I stood in the blue twilight, aghast. How could such a woman as Sigrid not have died crossing swords or defending the innocent?

I was very young.

The Sigrid rubbed her bald head thoughtfully, frowning at me, as if struggling with a secret. “Some in the Tower believe in a prophecy we refer to as the Heresy of the Lost. It is said by these women that Sigrid is not dead, but only lost, adrift within the cavernous belly of the Echeneis-whale, and that she lives still.” She coughed, clearly thinking this particular tale nonsense not fit for the ears of novices. “They fasten their hopes to a fragment of an ancient song which was passed from mother to child in the north of the world, where the *Maidenhead* was lost.”

She closed her eyes and sang softly:

O, sing of the ship with the mast of leaves
And the maiden who stood at her wheel!
Long ago, it is said, she was drowned until dead
And her red ship was split at the keel!

But she never went under, the old mothers know

And she'll sail the brine another day
An orphan will find her, a bear-cub will bind her
And the wolf will lead them astray.

And hand in hand they'll come whistling home
The maiden, the bear, and the girl in gray
Through the shining white foam,
The red ship will roam
And the wolf shall lead them astray.
And the wolf will lead her astray.

The Sigrid's voice was rough and low, like an oar pulling through dark water. When she opened her eyes, there seemed to be an odd light glimmering there, gentle and sad. I understood then that this Sigrid was a secret heretic, and I smiled to myself. But then, too, I began to believe the heresy, and worse, I began to believe that I was the one destined to find her—did not *The Book of Carrion* contain the same lines, and did not the dog-men whisper them as though they must refer to me?

Nothing in my life has birthed more pain than the faith I conceived in that moment.

There was no light left, then, and the Sigrid was silently replaced by another woman, as slender as she was muscular, but equally bald. The guard thus changed, the spice-skinned Sigrid took my hand in her huge palm, and I entered the Tower of St. Sigrid for the first time.

I did not leave it again for seven years.



"And that is all I can tell you of my first years in Al-a-Nur," Sigrid said, fingering dark patterns on the tavern table where decades of mugs had left their marks. "The rest is secret, the province of the Sigrids, and I could no more tell an uninitiated soul of the joys I suffered and the terrors I adored within those walls than I could tell a deaf woman how the sea sounds before a storm. I was accepted into the Sainthood—I received a name. We are all Sigrids, but we have our own titles. The Saint who is the Mother of us all is Saint Sigrid of the Nest. The woman who told me that tale on the steps of the Tower was Saint Sigrid of the Shallow Keel. I am Saint Sigrid of the Ways."

"Wait!" cried Snow. "That cannot be the end of the story! What about the Black Papess? How did you leave the city? Did you truly not see Bagdemagus for seven years? How can you stop a tale when so much of it remains, a meal half-eaten?" She was almost out of her chair with excitement—Snow had never known so many words laid next to each other at once, and all laid out for her. Sigrid laughed her languid, rough-hewn laugh.

"No, no, you're right. How impolite of me—there is a bit more to tell. But when I speak of the Mother and the Mast, I tend to drown in her story until I forget all the others. It is the way of religion. But Eyvind must fill up our cups again, and give us a plate of sweet bread and blackberry jam to strengthen the tale. I am not a small woman, and the stringing of stories like pearls on fishing line is not a task for the faint of belly."

Eyvind appeared more gracefully and with less commotion than Snow would have thought possible for a man of his size, and furnished them with fresh food and drink. To her surprise, he then dragged a heavy chair to the table and sat down himself to hear Sigrid speak, fixing her with his tired, drooping eyes. She seemed suddenly discomfited, like a bear caught scooping honey from a hive. But she drank deeply and swallowed a few mouthfuls of bread, and, eyes darting like fireflies between Eyvind and Snow, began again.

"It is the custom for novices, once their hair is shorn, not to leave the Tower for a full seven years. When they step outside it for the first time, it is not onto the soft grass but onto the deck of a small boat, and the acolyte then spends a circuit of seasons plying the river with her craft, never walking on dry land. Only after this is she allowed to venture into the Dreaming City itself. But I was not in seclusion for more than a few months when Bags begged an exception for me. I was not allowed to cross the threshold of the Tower, but he came to the gate, and I sat within it, my skull newly bare, and we talked, like old friends in need of succor. For the Black Papess had entered the Gates of Al-a-Nur…"



"I SUPPOSE IT'S SIGRID NOW, IS IT?" BAGS ASKED, scratching his great furry ear.

I sat, legs crossed serenely, determined to act every inch the devout novice. "Of course," I intoned, as sagely as I could manage.

Bags smiled at me, his grin all teeth and silky muzzle. He leaned over the threshold and whispered huskily: "I've always thought it was a beautiful name."

I giggled, and held out my arms to be embraced over the awkward liminal law of the door I could not exit and he could not enter. He clapped me on the back several times and rubbed my shorn head gently where all my lovely hair had once been.

"And the sea-dog look suits you!"

"Oh, Bags, I've missed you!"

"No fear, lass, we've all missed you. We'd have looked after you in our own Tower, but we are glad for you here—sometimes a woman needs to be with her own. But I haven't come to tell you how pretty you look or dote on you like an old wolf nosing one of his favorite pups! Great things are afoot in the City, things you couldn't know about, cloistered away in your sail-slung Tower. I came to tell you how things fared with the Papess!"

"*Fared?* I've missed the battle?" I was furious, of course.

"In a manner of speaking." Bags nodded, suppressing a giggle himself. "But don't worry yourself, little whelp—I've come to tell you of the great contest, the great duel that Yashna fought with Ragnhild in the center of the City."

I remembered myself then, and took a step backward into the familiar shadows of my Tower. “But why should I know these things, Bags, when the other girls are at their studies and not called to the door like a princess to meet her suitor? If I am to know it, oughtn’t I to wait until the Saints tell me in their own way, in their own time?” I dropped my voice to a whisper. “I’m a good girl; I don’t want them to think I’m not.”

Bags’s brown eyes glittered. “You are a good girl, my young Sigrid. I would never doubt it. I have spoken to Shallow Keel and you are mine for the afternoon. And as for your right to know above all the other girls—if you were a worse student, you would likely know already, for the story has spread through the Towers like fire through a village of thatched roofs. But you earn the right to hear it firsthand because you came to the City with us, on the wings of our terrible errand. You are already part of this story—and you will be a part of its ending, before long.”

Bags settled himself into the corner of the door frame and took my hands in his. He nuzzled my face a little with his sleek snout and growled slightly with the pleasure of a father who sees his litter grown, hunting swift and strong.

“Just listen, love, for I have a tale to tell which will be repeated in the alleys of Al-a-Nur as long as there are Towers to shadow the streets…”



Of course we knew she would come, sooner or later. We knew she would come leading all the hordes of Shadukiam, all the horrors the Rose Dome could produce. She did not disappoint us, and came riding a great black antelope, whose slender legs were hooved in fire, and whose baleful eyes seemed to look in all directions at once. Behind her came her legions, Djinn with beards of smoke and spells in their saddlebags, Monopods drafted out of their ghettoes, their feet armored and bristling with iron spikes, Centaurs and archers with a dozen arms, even a few Manticore bred in who knows what foul cage. And the humans screaming their war cries like frenzied ravens, all those men with swords flashing, drunk on hatred of the Golden City, and adoration of the pale-haired Papess.

But she did not bring her damned army through the silver spires of the Salmon Gate. She bade them halt in the green fields outside the ringed Towers, and they halted. They quieted their cries and laid themselves out on the clover as though they had come to a country picnic—so completely were they in her power.

And Ragnhild, First and Second of her Name, the Black Papess of Shadukiam, entered the Holy City alone, without even a knife at her belt. She entered it like a postulant, with nothing but her torn dress fluttering in the wind, and her pale hair streaming behind her like a battle standard.

And alone she walked to the center of the City, to the Tower of the Papess, and no one dared to stop her, but all who could lay down their duties followed

in her wake like a wave of flesh. Slowly, and without a sound, she seemed to glide over the blue-pebbled streets to the plain Tower with its deer-skin-slung windows, and strode through the door as if no one could contest her right to do so—as if it were her own house.

We were closeted with Yashna, in conference as we so often are these days. My brothers and I immediately growled; our hackles rose, ready to defend our Papess from whatever dank, filthy magic Ragnhild had brought with her into that sacred place. But the Apostate, her face as fair and terrible as it had been in the depths of our dreams, raised up her hands in a gesture of amity.

"Peace, my children! I have not come to fight with you, or to molest your poor Yashna. Smooth your venerable furs, and cool the blood in your veins. I have come on an errand of friendship. And we have seen, brave dogs, that you have no power over me. So I will say it again: Calm yourselves."

Yashna said nothing, but smiled imperceptibly, like a leaf rustling in a faint autumn wind. Bartholomew snarled in her stead: "An errand of friendship? With that band of creatures at your back?"

Ragnhild smiled coolly. "I have brought them for my own defense. Surely you do not expect me to breach the Gates of Al-a-Nur with nothing but my own skin to protect me against the Draghi. I know too well the fate of innocent maids when the ire of the Towers is raised." She lifted her delicate wrists and shook the golden manacles that still hung there like a dancer's bracelets. The high, thin sound echoed in the chamber.

Balthazar's fiery eyes narrowed into slits. "She cannot be trusted, Mother. You must call on the Draghi now, before she has unleashed whatever magic she is hiding."





Ragnhild laughed, a sound like glass breaking, or ice shattering over a running river. “Surely you do not think I could hide much in this, dear wolf,” she said, gesturing to the wide tears in her violet gown. “But enough—I did not come to speak with those I have already welcomed in my own hall. I came to treat with my sister, and put all this misunderstanding behind us.”

Yashna stirred in her chair and peered out at the Black Papess, whose smile seemed to glow with forgiveness and kindness.

“Very well, my child. Speak with me,” she said, her voice steady and deep.

“The Caliph has declared me the rightful Papess, not once, but twice. He has declared Al-a-Nur a territory of the Caliphate and demands tribute. You cannot refuse these things—even a City of Heaven must bow to the Laws of Earth. Indeed, I was anointed long before you, sweet lady, in the days when Cveti performed her heresy. By rights this City is mine. I will take it by force, if I must, but I do not wish to. Abdicate in my favor and I will allow you to go into seclusion in the Tower of the Dead, your home. All will be peaceful, and the City will go on as it always has. Surely you must see how greatly I have been wronged by Al-a-Nur, and understand that I am not a wicked woman—I only ask for what is mine by the hand of the Caliph and the hand of Heaven.”

Yashna rose from her seat, her yellow robes sighing behind her, and put out her hands to Ragnhild, taking those slim white forearms in her own withered brown palms.

“No one would deny that in your youth and innocence, you were wronged terribly, not only by Ghyfran, but by the Caliph himself. We know your sad tale, and we grieve for the gentle and bright-hearted girl you once were. If we could restore your life to you, please believe that we would do so, without a moment’s hesitation. But it is not in our power—it would not even have been in our power to restore what strange and alien life you have taken for yourself in this body.” Yashna paused, her eyes as full of pity as a well with water after a storm. “But you cannot believe I will simply hand this City to you. You know,

in that stranger's heart, that what you ask is wrong. The child who came to Shadukiam innocent of the schemes around her is still within you, and she knows I will not give you what you want."

Ragnhild continued to smile in her bright, cold way, and her hands tightened on Yashna's arms. "Then I will burn it to the ground, and let my Centaurs piss on your altars and spill their wine over every holy text in this clutch of hovels. And when I have finished, the Caliph will send his men to rape your nuns and count out every stone of this carrion-town for the Treasury." Her smile deepened and grew even sweeter. Yashna's expression did not change.

"The Caliph cannot and will not touch us. Why do you think he has set up little girls in his bank vaults instead of assaulting us directly? Why has he never marched an army to the brink of our borders? He knows the Draghi are very charming and debonair, but they are decadent, and they are not a tenth of our power. The heavens themselves will crack and spill their mortar onto the heads of any soldier who dares touch the flesh of a priestess of this City. You will find the same if your monsters broach the Gate. Please believe that I do not lie to you—I am of the Dead, and the Dead have no need of fiction. You think we are at an impasse, and that to avoid bloodshed, I will surrender to your smile, or your kiss." Yashna released the Apostate's arms, her dark eyes flashing suddenly like iron striking stone. "We are *not* at an impasse, and the Dead care nothing for whether the blood of the living is spilled. Bring your army within the Salmon Gate, and I swear to you by the Seven Corpses of Heaven, not a shred of their skin will be left when the moon rises."

Ragnhild's smile faltered slightly; her eyes seemed to shiver within themselves, and for a moment, for only a moment, I could see the creature she must have been before the Caliph had her, and I pitied her, may the Bough bend in forgiveness. But it was a moment soon past, and the seraphic smile had returned, harder and brighter than ever.

"You cannot frighten me with the oaths of the Dead, old woman. I am dead —I am a wraith on the earth. I have crossed into shadow while you and your priests sit playing with toy gravestones in your Tower. Do not speak of what you do not know."

Yashna's gentle gaze returned, like spring returning to a thicket of pine boughs. "Stop, my daughter. You do not need to brag to me of your putrefaction—I believe you. But I have a solution, if you will hear it. In recognition of Ghyfran's mutilation of your first body, I will extend to you a single chance to take the Papacy in truth."

Ragnhild leaned forward eagerly, scenting her victory.

"You wish to rule the Dreaming City; you must excel in all its ways. Play with me, a single game of Lo Shen. If you best me, I will go into seclusion as you ask, and you will ascend to the Tower without the slightest argument, and without battle. No one will contest you, and you will rule as well as you are able. If you lose, however, you must disband your army, and take the vows of one of our Towers, enter it as a novice, and pledge yourself to our City for the rest of your days. In the Anointed City, this is the way disputes are settled. If you would rule us, you must behave as one of us. Show me that you are the rightful Papess. Show me that you exceed us in all things."

Ragnhild seemed to laugh, but no sound issued from her rosy mouth. Her eyes glittered like snowflakes catching the sun. "You cannot be serious. A single game to decide five hundred years of history?"

"Were it not that once my predecessor harmed you, I would simply kill you where you stand."

Ragnhild was silent for a long time, studying her opposite number. There was no sound but breathing in the Tower, the shallow, quick sighs of all of us waiting to learn what would become of this infant war. Finally, Ragnhild seemed to come to a decision, and leaned forward, her shimmering hair brushing Yashna's wrist. She cupped the older woman's face in her hand, almost as a sister might, comforting her sibling with a touch. She tilted her head and pressed her lips to Yashna's dry mouth, kissing her deeply, passing all of her murky magic through her lips and into the body of the ancient Papess.

When the kiss was ended, Yashna remained as she was, her smile, perhaps, a little sadder and a little more rueful than before.

"We are both creatures of the Dead, my dear. Let us not try to befuddle each other with these cheap glamours. It does not become us. Play my game, as I have now played yours, or go back to your army and see if the prancing Draghi are the worst we can muster to keep an infidel from our halls."

I thought for a moment that Ragnhild would cry. I cannot think why I would imagine that haughty face could break into tears, but I did.

"I will play," Ragnhild said quietly, with great dignity—the dignity, one might say, of a Papess. Yashna took her arm in a grandmotherly gesture and led her into the courtyard outside the Tower, and my brothers and I carried the vast ceremonial board into the sunlight, where the nuns and monks, priestesses and oracles, brothers and sisters, gathered to watch the greatest game in the history of Al-a-Nur.

How can I describe for you the spooling thread of a single game of Lo Shen, let alone the greatest game played in the annals of the Spheres? Should I tell you that the throng was hushed as grasses on a still summer day? How the Merchants and the Oracles and the Patricides gathered close in, how the Living and the Dead peered over their shoulders for one glimpse of the Apostate taking her place at the Board? That the light seemed to fall into Ragnhild's hair and pool there, so that her head was ablaze in a halo of light? That Yashna was ever Yashna, calm, quiet as the reflection of a star, her head solemn and gray, and never aflame? That the whole thing looked like a painting, and not like anything that was actually happening before us? Or shall I orate upon the nature of the game, its perfect complexity, the slide of stone pieces on a round stone board? What came first, the City or the Game? Surely it must have been the Game; how else could the Towers and roads be arranged in the patterns of the thousand combinations of Lo Shen? Yet the Game contains pieces called Pagoda-Towers, and Draghi, and Papesses, and Gods.

If the City came first, perhaps the Game is no more than a dumb imitation of Al-a-Nur in all its sapphire-paved glory. But if the Game existed in the shadowy years before the light of the Dreaming Towers, then perhaps there is some secret locked within its moves, some prophecy which would tell us, could we but read its meaning, the fate of all these roofs and doors. Perhaps the Papesses were made to defeat each other within the Game because one day there would be two Papesses to face each other in the City. Perhaps all our lifetimes of study of the Game were meant to culminate on that morning, in the sunlight thin as bones.

I do not know, little Sigrid, if they have begun to teach you the many formations of Lo Shen yet. If not, they will soon. We spend half our lives in study of this game; all our internecine disputes are solved with it—for the object is to topple the God of the opposing player: the single piece that rests at the center of the board, nestled within thirteen concentric Spheres, unable to move unless it is to defeat its opposite number. It is poetic, and it is political.

And so it came to pass that two women sat, quiet as nuns, at a great blue board the size of a giant's shield. Their hands flashed over the pieces like crow's wings waving, pale Triremes and dark Pagodas rising and falling, ranks of Draghi eradicated in a blow. Intricate combinations arose like glass webs, the Papesses as perfectly matched to each other as sisters: *Chang-O* and *T'ien Fei, Pa Na* and *P'an Niang.* For a long while, no one could see a clear advantage, the pieces merely circled the board like autumn leaves caught in a whirlpool. Ragnhild's hair curled around her hips as a cat's tail may around its haunches, and her soft smile never faltered, even as Yashna's exquisitely executed *Mang-Chin-I* combination swept her third Papess from the board.

I watched the sun move over their bent heads, cutting its path through the sky. The struggle for the city passed without a word, between grandmother and grandchild, and neither I, nor my brothers, nor the ranks of Draghi with their silver helmets flashing, could affect a single slide of a Pagoda from Sphere to Sphere.

It drove us mad, of course, standing still at the sidelines. In the silence, my fur bristled as though it had been set aflame. But we are all of us, no matter what our Towers, accustomed to standing by while our mistresses perform their magic.

Finally, Yashna brought her Trireme forward in a quick slashing diagonal—just in the way a ship slips between the gusts of wind to stay on course. A ripple of caught breath swept through the crowd. The glistening piece, carved out of dark blue stone in the shape of a ship at full sail, completed her move: *Shun I Fu-Jen*. All four of her Papesses stood around the center Sphere, with a Pagoda-Tower, slim and gleaming, one ring behind them. It is an inescapable pattern, and Ragnhild's sea-colored eyes flickered in anger, seeing what we all did: that her God was trapped, and there was no move she could make to save it.

"*Sheng Mu,* my daughter. I have slain your God."

Yashna smiled in her way, a mother's smile which at once glows with pride in her child's performance and softens in regret at their shortcomings. She then stretched out her arm over the embattled Board and plucked the Apostate's God from the center Sphere. Holding the ends of the featureless blue column, pale as water in sunlight, in either hand, she bowed in the ritual fashion as she broke the piece in half. It takes great strength to end a Game in the old way, the way of the first Nurians, whose honor and shame were measured by the number of broken Gods their altars held.

Ragnhild, to her credit, took the severed pieces and bowed in her turn. Her face held no expression, but her cheeks burned, in rage, or in humiliation. I could not tell, for myself. She held her God at her side, fist tightening around the pieces until blood began to drip, thick and viscous, from her palm.



Bags stopped and stretched in the sun, stroking his silky muzzle with strong hands. The snow of my Tower swirled lazily around him, unaffected by the warm sunlight.

"Is the army still at the Gate?" I asked breathlessly.

He just smiled toothily. "I can't say I understand her, you know. My brothers and I, with a company of Draghi, took her to the Gate, and the great army stood there, black and red flags snapping in the wind. I thought she would order them to flatten the City. I thought she would try to kiss us again and madden us into joining her. I thought she would conjure some terrible fiend and blow through the blue streets of Al-a-Nur like a fiery wind. Where in women like her is the capacity to abide by an oath? But she did none of these things. She stared at her vast horde with no tear in her gray eyes. Slowly, she unlatched the golden manacles from her wrists and threw them to the dry earth. Her skin was red where they had chafed and rubbed her raw. She held out a white palm for a moment, and the air over it crackled silver and white, like a burning snowflake. Turning her hand over, the crackle of air shot down to the manacles, and they vanished, leaving nothing, not even dust."

The Cynocephalus shook his head, as if unable to believe what he was describing.

"The moment those chains disappeared, the whole army shimmered and disappeared right alongside them. In their place were a few starving lizards, feral cats, and one horse so old and mistreated that its ribs bowed like the

bands of wine cask. The spectacle was nothing more than glamours and mirages. Ragnhild's jaw clenched.

"'It is one thing,' she whispered, her rage barely suppressed, 'to command love and loyalty under the Rose Dome, where gold and beauty may buy any heart. It is another to bring them across the plains and pit them against a city they are certain is full of witches and messiahs—another to lead them in the body of a dead girl, to lead them when they knew I had stolen it, when they thought me a Yi, to be feared, but never one for whom they would risk death. They would not even risk dying in my presence, in terror that I would seize their corpses. They would not come.' She sank to her knees, and pulled at the ragged shreds of her gown. 'What was I to do? Five hundred years, and they would not come. I had to try, didn't I? For the child I was before all this, I had to try.'"

I sat back, stunned. All this had gone on while I was ensconced in prayer and study, with no notion of anything but icons of Saint Sigrid and nautical illuminations. Not for the first time, I burned to have done with contemplation, and witness those great deeds—the Game, the army, the fall of the Black Papess—for myself.

I was never a very good student.

But as I was rebelling against my Tower in my heart, a great commotion arose in the distance. A cluster of folk were moving up the path toward the Tower of St. Sigrid, kicking up dust like a ship leaving a white wake behind it.

In the center of the throng was a woman with hair of pale gold that lay over her brow like a crown, and she wore a deep violet dress.

My voice caught in my throat, and I stood, knees quivering, to greet them as they arrived. The Black Papess, Papess no more, wore a new set of manacles, plain iron, dull and gray. Her head was bent, in anger or shame I could not tell.

"She was given a choice, as you were, and she chose the Sigrids," Bags said, reaching across the threshold to touch my hair lightly. "If nothing else, she takes with grace the punishment the seed-scattered earth deals her. You must take her in."

"No! I… I can't! I'm only a novice. I cannot accept a new Sigrid!"

"Even a novice knows that she who guards the door is charged with the initiation of any postulant who appears on her watch. It is your duty, now."

Ragnhild raised her eyes to me, and I am not ashamed to say that I had never seen anything so beautiful as her silver gaze, the depth of feeling and sorrow and suppressed fury in her cool eyes. They searched me with a strange longing. When she spoke, the words were rote, taught to her by her captors, dead and empty, and forced. But her voice was rough, like silk torn by sharp diamonds, and I believed, truly, that she wanted nothing more than to disappear into the Tower and never emerge again.

"Please, Saint Sigrid, take me in from the storm and teach me to steer through darkness, for I am lost, and I cannot see the shore."

I did not move for a long moment. Then, slowly, I reached out my hand to her and whispered, "Come, Lady, I will cut your hair for you."

Her hand slipped into mine, hard and cool.



Sigrid seemed engrossed in picking the dirt and bits of rope from under her fingernails. She stared at them intently, avoiding Snow's pale eyes.

"And that, little love, is where I cease to be the hero of my own tale. Seven years went by, and then my year on the river currents. My time was not so very different from any other Saint—I read, I prayed, I studied sky maps and sea maps; I illuminated countless manuscripts with tiny golden Griffin and their infants. My hair grew back; I did not cut it, as many of the others did. They wished to be humble before the Stars and their servant Saint Sigrid. I believed that I was blessed, chosen. I believed"—the great woman paused and grimaced, closing her eyes as if her mouth was flooded with bile—"I believed that I was the orphan of the prophecy—for I was alone in the world, was I not? My mother was alive when I left her, but perhaps by now she had died and her body was lying cold on a slab of ice in the Temple, tended by my sisters. This was my reasoning, my folly. I was more eager to believe my own mother dead than that I was not spoken of in some old ballad. I let my hair grow long, for I knew that the wolves had led me astray, and my destiny was to find the lost *Maidenhead* and her captain."

In one swallow, Eyvind drained the last of his mug and grunted softly, mockingly. Sigrid smiled ruefully.

"As soon as I was able, I left the Tower and the Dreaming City, and took to the sea in my little ship—for the last task of a Sigrid is to build a ship with her own hands, to perfect its lines and sails, and prove that it is sea-worthy. On the

day of my trials my craft performed beautifully, but instead of returning to receive my marks, I simply sailed away into the horizon. For years upon years I searched for any sign of the Echeneis, any tale of its passing. I scoured every sailor's haunt and foul-smelling tavern for someone who could tell me where this creature swam. How could something so vast hide itself from me? I found nothing. Not even a whisper of such a beast. Most had never even heard the word. Finally, I was forced to admit that perhaps I had been mistaken, that my mother lived, or that I simply was not the woman of the prophecy. And when this truth settled in me like a stone sinking to the bottom of a well, I died. I died to the world. I was despondent, and in my grief I sailed into a storm that my poor ship could not survive. It was dashed to pieces, and I was dragged from the sea by a Muireanner's fishing boat, seaweed clogging my mouth and my lips gone blue as sapphires. The fisherman rubbed life back into my limbs and cleared the ropy leaves from my mouth, and fed me a thin broth until I could stand on my own. Muireann is far to the north, the last part of the world graced by Saint Sigrid's ship and her crew. It seemed a good enough place to waste the last of my days."

Sigrid looked up at Eyvind, a strange cloud passing over her broad features.

"There were other reasons to stay. Things lying in the secret corners of this town I thought were long dead. But in my failure, in my shame and my hubris, I could not seek them out. Instead, I tied the knots of men's nets on the docks, and drank myself into dreams until I could forget that once I imagined myself a child of destiny, a heroine meant for the greatest task any Sigrid could wish for herself."

Snow thought she could see tears well up in Sigrid's tired eyes, but she could not be sure. She put her hesitant hand on the older woman's fingers, warm and brown beneath her icy palm.

"When my parents died," Snow said quietly, "and my hair went silver overnight, I thought it was a sign. A sign from the Stars that I was their special daughter, that they would be my mother and father. I thought I was meant for something more. But I do not even have nets to mend every day. I scrape in the street for a bit of fish and bread, I starve in the belly of a half-built ship most nights. It is not a grand destiny, but at least it is mine. And without it, I would

not have known a real, living Saint." Snow touched her long, shimmering hair, in awe of it as she ever was, and as ashamed.

"I'm afraid I am a poor kind of Saint for you, my girl. Maybe the worst kind —"

Her words were cut off by a loud bang—the door of the Arm slamming open as a riotous group of three bizarre creatures burst into the common room, laughing raucously, like a pack of raccoons squabbling over a rubbish heap. Two enormous men, their muscles knotting under tattooed skin—not an inch of flesh showed which was not covered in colorful illustrations of battles at sea, mermaids with their arms trailing kelp, snarling tigers, lighthouses with beacons alight—carried between them a massive wooden tub filled to the brim with sloshing water. It spilled over the side onto the floor every time the men moved, and by the time they reached the bar, half the floor was swimming in brine.

In the tub was a woman with green gills opening at her throat, an inferno of green hair blazing around her head, and skin that held the sickly pallor of a fish. Her meaty hands were webbed as a frog's, her ears long and thin, like tiny fins. She was naked, and her ample breasts sagged heavily, tipped in blue nipples. From the waist down, her legs merged into a long, corpulent tail, silver-violet, with translucent tendrils flapping where her feet might have been. She took great pleasure in thrashing the tail about, spraying other patrons with water.

Snow stared in wonder. "Is that a mermaid?" she gasped.

Eyvind pushed back his chair with a loud screech of wood on wood. "If only! Mermaids are pretty as daisies, and they sing nice little rhyming songs all the day long, and they smell a fair sight better than that heap of dead clams. That's a Magyr, and she'll drink me into the street in an hour." He trundled over to the boisterous trio, his face a cold glower. After a moment, Sigrid and Snow followed, curious as a pair of kittens.

"Oy! Eyvind!" the Magyr hollered, her voice like a wave sluicing through a tide pool cluttered with clapping mussels. "Fill my gullet with ale and my men's bellies with some of that foul bread you cook up in your back room! Have I got a story for you! You'll never believe it, not in a month of miracles!"





"I never believe any of your stories, Grog. And you'll show me your coin before you get a drop."

She ran a corpse-colored hand through her emerald hair, and when it came away, it was full of rough, filthy golden coins, so old that Snow had never seen their like. They were embossed—faintly, worn by countless hands and pockets—with the image of a single eye. Grog bit one of them with satisfaction. Sigrid stiffened.

"Aye, the great cow knows what these are! Coin from the Arimaspian Oculos! Two hundred years and more extinct, and yet I've got more of their coin than any collector in Ajanabh! Ask me where I got it! Go on, ask me!" Grog was crowing, stroking her shiny gills in delight.

"Where did you get it?" Sigrid asked, her voice icy and low.

Grog licked her bluish lips in anticipation and seized her tankard in one huge hand, the thin webbing between her fingers slapping wetly against the metal.

"My men—that's Sheapshank and Turkshead, you know, and it don't matter which one's which—had booked us passage on a sweet little schooner captained by a beast the likes of which a mother wouldn't even threaten her squalling brats with…"



She were seven feet tall if she were an inch, I swear it by my mother's fifth teat. All sweetness and light from the neck up—a regular princess, with hair like melting butter and starry eyes—but oh, those legs! A deer's legs, right down to the hoof, or would have been, if she had had hooves. Instead, she had great flapping frog's feet, and turquoise wings, feathers and all, tucked against her back. Her skin was all over tiger stripes, and her hands were furry as a wolf's, with great clacking claws. And of all things, a thick gray tail wagged through a slit in her skirts.

She was a perfect monster. But beggars can't be choosers! I can swim just as fine as a young shark, of course, but poor Sheapshank, he can't swim a stroke to save his throat, and Turkshead has a deathly fear of the sea. Anyway, I prefer to travel in style, with my tub full of warm water and a mug of rum in each hand. The ocean is cold as a witch's womb, don't you know, and it makes my tail peel to go wallowing through it week after week. A ship is far better suited to my taste, even if Turkshead retches like a pregnant wench every time a stiff wave washes the deck.

Now, my youngest sister had spawned not a fortnight before, and me being the maternal type, practically bursting at the gills with motherly affection, I wanted to see my little nieces and nephews whilst they was still wiggling little tadpoles—and enjoy a month's helpings of my sister's whitefish and squid pies. But the sea has spread my family far as the four winds would take us, and Tack's grotto is a full month's sail over the ice caps from Muireann.

Muireanners don't take kindly to those of the maritime persuasion mucking up the berthing on their ships, so Sheapshank and Turkshead asked after the most desperate captain on the docks, one who wouldn't turn their dainty nose up at a paying fare.

And that was how we met Magadin.

Sheapshank and Turkshead carried my tub over to her fingerpier. I slapped the side of the old boat, fine old locust wood by the color, though more than a little dingy and worse for wear. I peered at the hull, where the ship's name appeared to have been carved into the wood by an inexpert hand. *Witch's Kiss,* it read, rather shakily. Just then her head appeared from behind the second mast.

"Are you looking for passage north, then? Old Man Glyndwr told me you'd be sloshing on by."

That woman's voice was like hot wine on a cold night. I gestured for my boys to set me down.

"What are you, woman, the City Zoo?" Sheapshank barked laughter at my little joke, but the lady just smiled.

"Hardly. There was a Wizard, some years back. He favored me with a change of costume." She scratched at the tops of her blue wings with a lazy claw.

"Ain't there always a Wizard, though? Bloody menace, if you ask me. No one cares for the likes of us freaks, but a whole stinking heap of us never caused the trouble of one Wizard in an ever-damned tower."

I thumped my tail in sympathy, but Turkshead leered at her and gnashed his teeth. I stroked his bald head to calm him—just like a pup my Turkshead is, can't stand the smell of a stranger. I traced circles on his painted pate as Turkshead moaned in pleasure. "So, pray tell, Lady Menagerie, how did you come by a ship as big as all this? A captain all by yourself and no one stabbing you in the heart in the depths of night to steal it?"

The beast-maiden swung lightly down from the upper deck and fixed her amber eyes on me. She moved faster with those mixed-up limbs than I would have thought.

"If I tell you the tale, will you buy passage on my ship, and look nowhere else? I'm hungry as a whelp without a dam, and I'd be glad of the wage."

I gripped her hand in mine straightaway, flippers on claws—no one else would have taken us, anyhow. "Aye, that I will."

"Well, then. Just as there is always a Wizard, there is always a hero ready to rescue a pretty girl—and some do think me pretty, strange as it seems. But that's not important. My life didn't begin, in truth, until I came to Muireann…"



BEING A MAIDEN, YOU SEE, IS NOT QUITE THE SAME as being alive.

It is more like being a statue. The main skill of a maiden is to stand very still and look very beautiful. Even when I was a captive, I did little more than sit on my wooden stool and try not to cry. I was nothing; I did nothing. Not until I rode on the back of a red Beast through the ramshackle gate of Muireann did I ever take a step or utter a word that was not planned out for me by folk in black robes—whether those robes were those of parents or wizards, it didn't matter much.

But Beast, kind as he was, could do little more than leave me at the pier and suggest to the townsfolk that I might be a fair hand at sail-mending, or deck-swabbing, if one of them were to take me on. The throng of Muireanners stood stock-still in terror of the scarlet demon that had carried me to them, and a few nodded dumbly, praying only that he would leave, so that they could forget him all the sooner. Beast nibbled my ear with affection, and trotted off back to his Marsh and his King.

When he had gone, the crowd spat on me, and knocked me to the ground. They cut the webbing between my toes and half sawed my tail from my body. They would have broken my wings if they could have managed it, but I am no little bluebird in the hands of a child. My bones are strong, and they held. I was left bleeding and broken on the docks while they went laughing into their ships' holds for dinner, and night was coming on. What was I to do? All I knew,

after all those years in my Tower, was how to stay very still so that people could look at me.

And so I lay there, utterly still, under the stars like chips of ice, until they came. I must have fallen asleep on the cold stones, for I awoke to a hand clamped over my mouth and a toothy hiss in my ear:

"Hush now, precious. Hush now." The voice's owner dragged me up into its arms like a cat snatching the scruff of her kitten's neck. In a whirl of shuffling feet, foul breath, and foul murmurings, I was carried to a creaking ship and lashed to the mizzenmast.

"Well, my mixed-up girl, you wanted to serve on a ship—I promise you'll serve now." The voice that had hissed in my ear on the docks belonged to a high-cheeked captain in a hat festooned with threadbare blue feathers and worn velvet. He was handsome as a duke—save that when he smiled his mouth was full of rotted teeth, yellow as a decrepit old wolf's.

"Now," he said, "we're going to sell you off at one southern port or another—if the mummers won't take you and the slavers won't take you, the fur traders will, and if they won't the meat markets will. But in the meantime you can put those mismatched parts to work scrubbing this ship splinter by splinter." He grinned, and tipped his hat. "And, well, it's a long voyage south. After a few weeks, you'll look downright fetching, and really, you're not bad from the chin up."

I looked up at him and my mouth watered behind my gag. I coughed politely, to let him know I wished to speak, and he obligingly removed the filthy rag. I made my voice as sweet and flutelike as a princess can. "You needn't sell me. I can be useful, and I won't fight you, or your men."

The Captain shrugged and stood straight, brushing the knees of his breeches clean. "This is what piracy is. If we took you willing, what kind of pirates would we be? You can be sweet and yielding as the first cream of the season with me, but try to put on a good scream for my boys. It keeps morale up."

I could not scrub the decks. My deer's legs would not bend, and my frog's feet slipped on the deck. I stumbled and fell, and a smart punch to the side would

answer my clumsiness. I forgot, as the days went by, that I was a maiden, and then I forgot what a maiden was. The Captain told me each morning that he would expect me in his chamber that night; he told me each night that I was too repulsive for his taste, but "less ugly than you were yesterday, and uglier than you will be tomorrow."

One night, the crew was drunk on their last rations of rum, and they hauled me to their quarters. I remembered to scream. They jeered like jackals and pelted me with slaps and blows, until one of them thought it would be a fine trick to cut off my hair.

"We'll make her a real deckhand," he said, laughing raucously, "and no one goes to sea with a head of yellow curls! Cut it off!"

He came behind me and gathered up my hair in his hands, my dragonfly wings fluttering in panic at the ends of the strands. Drawing his short blade, he sawed through the yellow locks, planting a slurping kiss on my bare neck.

I did not know what would happen, I swear I did not. He cut my hair, yes, but instead of silky curls falling to the floor, blood began to sheet from the severed ends as though he had cut into my heart, and my wings buzzed so loudly I could hardly hear the men's cries of terror and disgust. They backed away from me, staring, as blood soaked my shirt and the secondhand trousers they had found in a dead sailor's trunk.

I stumbled to my feet, my vision a red blur. I felt very strange, as though all the creatures that had gone into my misshapen body were waking up, clawing for purchase on my soul. The wolf and the stag and the tiger and the bear, the frog and the dragonfly and the fish—all their many-colored voices begged to be heard, who had never so much as whispered before. My flesh was filled with howling, howling and baying and croaking and crying, roaring and shrieking, so much shrieking, like broken flutes thrown against a stone floor.

The wolf leapt first, I think, and then the tiger. I clawed out the throats of three sailors, and chewed through the ear of another before cutting into his eyes. The stag kicked at prone skulls, and the bear lunged into naked bellies. The frog and the dragonfly remembered to scream.

When it was over none of them were left; the room was empty as a prison cell. I wanted to feel sick. I wanted to delicately retch in the corner or feel faint, collapse in guilt. But I was not sick or faint, and the creatures in me

exulted. Maidens stand still, they are lovely statues and all admire them. Witches do not stand still. I was neither, but better that I err on the side of witchery, witchery that unlocks towers and empties ships.

It was easy, once I had decided that, to slip into the captain's quarters and into that soft bed at last. The pillow was cool on my face, the blood of my hair dried and black against the fabric. I did not wait for him to wake, and I did not need a hidden knife. The bear opened him up like a beehive.

I sailed a ghost ship back into Muireann port.



The Beast-Maid caressed the rail of her ship tenderly. "No one wants this ship, just as no one wanted me. They say I use no sails, but lash the ghosts of the crew to the mast and let the moon fill them up like wind. This ship is mine. I know it like my own body, and I am not sorry for what I have done. That is what piracy is, I sup pose. I am not a maiden anymore, and I am glad to be done with that sorry state. I washed it off in blood and ocean. No one troubles me, and I do not trouble them."

"Well, that's a fish story and no mistake," I guffawed. My boys snorted derision along with their mistress, clapping each other on the back. "We've a real red-handed villain on our hands, boys! A hundred men at one blow!"

Magadin smiled patiently. "Not a villain. Not a witch, or a maiden. A captain, which is a little like being all three. But believe what you will. When a mermaid mocks a monster for telling a story too fantastic to swallow, who is to say which is the more ridiculous?"

I purpled, swelling up with rage like an overripe plum. "I am *not* a mermaid! Mermaids are skinny little fops with shells to cover their tiny tits! Mermaids do nothing but sit around on rocks staring into mirrors and teasing ships to their doom. Perfectly good ships! Galleons, even! Wasteful milksops, the lot of them, and you couldn't build half a brain if you had the whole race on a slab. I am a *Magyr*. I could crush your skull with my hands and drink this rat town under the table afterwards. And if I wanted to kill myself a passel of sailors, I'd bloody well do it with cannon, saber, and a fist in the teeth, not by batting my

damn eyelashes. You'd be wise to remember it, Maggie, my love, and if we see a mermaid on our jaunt across the high seas, the best thing for all of us would be to let Sheapshank here put an arrow through her giggling head."

With that, I gave her a good splash with my tail and ordered the boys to take me aboard.



Now it were a week on the waves, and Turkshead vomiting over the side every morning like a fisherman throwing chum to the whales. Weren't nothing unusual that I could see: the ocean's blue no matter the day or the tide, and if I loved the great salt thing enough to describe it, I'd love it enough to swim in it, do you get me?

Maggie, for her part, sailed that ship like nothing I've seen. My boys are no layabouts when it comes to crewing a fine ship—I bought them at a bargain from the Ajanabh fleet when they were so poor they couldn't buy splinters. But she wouldn't hear of it, running up and down that deck like a dervish. You wouldn't have thought anyone could man a ship that size all on their own, but Magadin did it, and no lie.

Which is how it happened that Turkshead was the one to sight the monster first, while chucking his chum at dawn for the twelfth day. He came spluttering up to my tub like a baby who's discovered his thumbs, and dragged the old barrel screeching across the deck, spilling my brine everywhere, so that I could stare over the rail and see, horribly, the water breaking over a shell so enormous that at first I thought we'd hit land.

It was difficult to clap an eye on, a shell like a turtle rising up, but the color of the sea itself, so that it seemed like a wave or a reef, but too impossibly huge to be alive. Turkshead was crying, babbling that it was going to eat us—but I couldn't see a head to the thing at all. It was nothing but shell, rising and rising,

water running off its back, slick tiles of shiny blue and black and green, repeating over and over like a puzzle. The ship was caught in a roil of froth and foam, the sea rushing into us as it rushed away from the beast.

"Leviathan," whispered Sheapshank, and he mumbled a prayer so that I could not hear—the boys know I don't approve of their bloody damned Stars.

Magadin cried out to us, dashing from sail to sail, fighting to keep us arights. "It's the Echeneis! Don't you read books? That's not even half its girth you see! It can swallow us and not even feel the prick of the mast in its gullet. Man those lines, Sheap, or we feed the monster!"

The boys were so glad of something to do they fell over themselves trying to get to that flapping jib first. I just watched, frozen as a side of seal meat. The thing was still rising, so high now that it cast its shadow over us, and I shivered in the sudden cold. Goose bumps stood out green and blue on my arms, and soon there weren't no sea at all, only the ugly black thing, growing like a dead sun. I looked hard for the head, searched like a fish prodding through coral for a meal, for the littlest break in the giant shell.

Sheapshank screamed—I'd never heard my poor boy scream, I protect him so he don't have to—an awful, keening sound like iron sawing through iron, and suddenly the waves broke over the head, a whale's head, with a mouth that never ended. It stretched, all smiles, around and around until it seemed it would split the monster's head, with long, yellow-white curtains of baleen gleaming sickly. Its eye was the color of an old corpse. A stink wafted out, like rancid meat and soiled cabbage. As soon as it broke the salt scrim, Turkshead unlatched one of the thick-handled harpoons hanging on the sides of the ship and hurled it with all his not-inconsiderable strength towards the mouth of the Echeneis.

It glanced off like a hanky thrown at an iron door.

Magadin sighed heavily, as if she expected it. Her sad little ship was losing her battle with the wind, and sliding towards the black blot of the monster. Her face, such a pretty face, really, in spite of everything, settled into a grimace, and though her scaly arms did not loosen on the wheel, I saw her despair.

The Echeneis saw nothing. It only began the long opening of its mouth. Gray water rushed in, a wave crashing with a terrible noise like palaces falling, and the dark of its throat yawned, pulling us in. No matter how Maggie pulled

at the wheel to swing us 'round, no matter how trim the lads kept the sails, we spiraled closer to the sloshing stomach of the sea-beast.

"Sheapshank, love!" I cried. "Your mistress is dumb as a team of cows. Bring me the harpoons!"

Always obedient, my Sheap gathered up an armful of spears and tipped them into my tub. "I swear, if my tits weren't screwed on, I'd have left 'em in a bar ten years ago." I grinned coyly up at his tattooed face. "Did I ever show you my gland, sweetheart? I don't show it to just anyone, but times being what they are…"

I lifted one of my heavy breasts and passed the sharp tip of a harpoon across the skin beneath. It parted, and a green ooze dribbled out onto my belly—Magyr, unlike those cretins called mermaids, are not defenseless dolls. We have sacs of poison in our chests, just like squid's ink. I stuck my hands into the mess of bubbling slime and told the boys and the beast-girl to do the same. Quickly, the four of us dipped the harpoons in my fluids and loaded Turkshead with the sopping sticks. He ran up to the prow, positively white with nausea, and hurled the first directly into the Echeneis's maw.

It disappeared, useless as a limp sailor.

He tried, again, and again it vanished into the black. Again, the monster didn't seem to grasp that it had swallowed enough Magyr oil to kill a herd of horses. Sheapshank sunk to the deck of the ship and began to cry.

But Mags, oh, Magadin—captain among captains, that one! She grabbed up the bundle of harpoons and kissed me smash on the forehead.

"See my ship gets home," she said, and winked at me. "The ship deserves a harbor, whatever happens to her sailors."

"Wait! If anyone's to go overboard, it ought to be the lady with the tail, don't you think?" It's not that I wanted to leap off into the blue, you understand. But I thought it was proper to offer.

Magadin laughed and thumped her wolf's tail against the rail.

"Absolutely!" she yelled. And with that, she leapt overboard, her frog's feet kicking up, bright green in the dull water. She was swept into the monster's mouth quicker than oil running downhill in summer—and as she passed the wall of baleen, she twisted, rode the swell of sea, and thrust her spears into the roof of its mouth.

The Echeneis roared in rage, and the sound bit at my ears, like rusty knives scraping the drum. It shook and pitched, the shell bulging bladder-full, and all in a rush, the hideous thing vomited, spewing a flood of gold coins onto the ship's deck, tearing through its wood like cannon-fire. The beast kept up its retching, showering the ocean with gold, and I saw Magadin's tail lift up soggily once, twice, before she disappeared into the black.



"The bloody ship was full of holes by then, of course. But full of gold, too! We steered out while the monster went under again—and a good thing we did! When the top of its shell sunk at the last, the sea washed in over it like a flood; we were almost caught. But my tub was at the wheel and the boys were patching holes for all they were worth, and we limped back into Muireann port with full purses! And not just gold, but antiques! Those are worth five times what a plain gold dime is! I'm only sorry I never got to see Tack's youngsters—and her pies." Grog looked sad for a moment, but drained her tankard and was all smiles again, her yellow teeth garish and bright. "That's a tale worth a meal, Evvy, wouldn't you say?"

But Sigrid's face had gone black and white at the same time, desire and hope and despair flitting like clouds across it. "You saw the Echeneis? You lost your captain to it?"

"Is this one deaf or feeble, Ev? Hasn't she heard what I said? Don't she got her hands full of dead men's gold?"

"Do you remember where, you soused dog?" Sigrid's eyes blazed like a fire in midwinter. "Could you find the place again?"

Grog looked at the woman pityingly. She ran her hands through her emerald hair, coifing the ratted heap.

"I know you're not from these parts, dearie, but you do see the tail, right? You do grasp the concept of a tail? It's for swimming and all? I may not like to dip my tender parts in it, but no one knows the sea like a Magyr. Of course I

could find it again. But I have no mind to—I consider it a gift that I escaped with full pockets, and I'm not about to go skipping about looking for a nice big mouth to jump into. Now fill up my cup, Eyvind, and keep your woman nice and quiet while a body's having her drink."

Snow, unseen by all, as always, had crept closer to the wide tub of brine, and pulled a knife from the bar into her thin hands. She leapt like a feral cat onto the lip of the tub, and seized Grog by a tuft of bottle-green hair.

"Take us," she hissed. "Take us to the monster or I'll cut your throat."

"Snow!" Sigrid gasped. "What's gotten into you? If anyone's to threaten the sea-cow, it'll be me."

"Sigrid," Snow pleaded, "you know what's out there. You've spent all this time telling me about Saint Sigrid, and you think I'll let a chance to be in that story, to be part of it, slide by? Didn't you give *eight* years to a Tower because a woman told you a story you loved? All I want is a few days at sea! You *know* it was you in the song—but couldn't it have been me, too? *An orphan will find her!* I'm an orphan if you ever knew one. You've waited all these years to find the Echeneis and you're going to let this greasy old thing stop us? Let me come with you, let me help you find her—and let me cut this foul-smelling fish if she won't help us!" Snow pressed the knife into the rolls of fat around Grog's neck, and the Magyr squealed helplessly.

"Fanatics!" she screeched. "I tell you, there is nothing so dangerous in the world as fanatics! Sheapshank! Turkshead! Snap this one in half for mistress!"

The great hulks of men leapt forward to pummel the pale child, but Eyvind stopped them with a glance.

"Touch her and I'll bash mistress's face in with a bottle of rum," he growled. Sigrid gave him a grateful nod.

"All right! All right! I'll take you there, you stinking dogs. You used to run a fair bar, Eyvind, but look at you now! Groveling before some fat wench and her brat!" Snow released the Magyr's head and climbed nimbly down from the tub rim. Grog glared at her and spat out a hunk of green phlegm, which splattered across Snow's back. Sigrid smiled wanly and wiped it off.

"Thank you," Snow said stiffly.

"Mistress," came a soft, high voice. Turkshead had crept forward and was kneeling at the side of the tub, pawing Grog like a pup. "Not the sea again. Not

the boat. Please. My stomach…"

"Not the sea again," agreed Sheapshank. "We've had enough. It's out there, waiting. We'll wait here for you—we love you—but we won't face the monster again."

Grog rolled her eyes. "Well, who will carry my tub, then? That waste of a girl couldn't lift a mug of rum!"

Eyvind coughed, spat, and gave the bar an affectionate swipe with his rag. "I'll go with you and carry your can of soup, you old sturgeon."

"Well, ain't that sweet of you, precious?"

"But I go for Sigrid. Not for you," he grumbled, and fixed his drooping eyes on the older woman.

"Fine. Everyone is so bloody loyal it stinks. Fanatics give me heartburn. Maggie's ship is lashed at the dock. Be sure you get a firm grip—I don't fancy spilling out on the street like a bucket of bluegill."

And so Sigrid, Snow, and Eyvind wrapped themselves in wool and readied themselves to go to sea. Sheapshank and Turkshead were given the back room to sleep in and the other customers gently shooed to the door.

"Bring a barrel of rum!" screeched the green-haired Magyr. "We'll want it, mark my words!"

In the Garden

"If you're a smart girl, you'll get out now," came the black-smith's voice like a hot iron through the silk night.

The girl jumped up immediately, accustomed to quick escapes, darting away from the blacksmith's shadow. She hardly looked at the boy as she dodged horses' legs and tin buckets, nimbly bounding out of the stable doors as the first drops of light seeped out of the East.

But though she found him safe and sleeping where she left him, Dinarzad kept the boy by her throughout the day, a torture worse than any she had yet devised, as he was made to copy her every action, and his fingers grew red and swollen from pinpricks, then black from inkstains, then blue with costly dyes. He could not do any of it properly, and so he was made to burn with shame under the disapproving stares of so many women. By evening, no matter how much he might wish to escape to the Garden, he was as exhausted as a deer which has stayed ahead of the hounds by the smallest of steps. Dinarzad insisted he sleep near her as well, and for once he did not protest, but fell onto the bed, sore and ashamed.

Past midnight, the boy woke to a pair of dark eyes peering through the stone arch, which was hung with soft violet gauze, thin as secrets. Dinarzad lay still on her bed, covered in white furs, and the boy thought, not for the first time, that when she did not speak or move, she was beautiful. Her smoky black hair

spread over the bed like a river of shadow, and her skin caught the moonlight just so. Her slim, elegant hands curled over the bronze keys which unlocked the bedchamber's proper door, and her breathing was slow and sweet as a flute.

The boy lay on a smaller spare bed, his own dark hair tangled, as though he had run his hands through it many times in anger. His eyes were wide and open, staring at the low window, and the girl's deer-poised form. He crept silently, a spider in a well, until he reached the windowsill and drew aside the lavender veils. Dinarzad's breathing continued, slow and rhythmic as a dance.

"You came!" he whispered. "How do you always find me?"

The girl smiled. "Magic," she whispered. "After all, I am a demon."

"You always come to the window, you come to find me and carry me away—that is not what girls are supposed to do. It is what the Princes do in all the stories."

"This is not that kind of story."

The boy tried not to look as glad as he was, a rabbit who knows that he will be caught, but cannot help devouring the carrot. He wished, fervently, that he could find her, and carry her off, like a proper Prince. But she was like air streaming through silk, and he could not touch her at all. They stood for a moment, separated by the low stone sill.

"I will be very quiet," she murmured, "so as not to wake your sister." She settled outside the window onto the deep, dewy grass, and closed her eyes.

"When the beast-maiden's ship had been bounding through the waves like a lioness through the grass for three days with Grog at the wheel, since no one would move her tub from that post, Eyvind found himself belowdecks with Sigrid, sharing a meager supper of seal fat and hard bread. They did not see Snow creep in behind them, as eager to hear their talks as a child who spies upon her parents…"



"We've got a farmer's bushel of time, now, Sigrid," Eyvind said, settling into a chair with a grunt and a sigh. He sliced off the heels of a loaf for himself and spread it with the salted grease. "And it's been near ten years you've been making eyes at me and drinking my beer at the Arm, near enough to ten years that you've been looking like there were something you wanted to say to me—ten years that you haven't been saying it." He leaned in, his sandy hair flopping over his brow like a tuft of fur. "I'm thinking it's long past time you tell me whatever it is you've been keeping locked up tight behind those teeth."

She sighed, and stared at the grain of the table wood, unable to look the tavern-keeper in the eye.

"Eyvind," she began, her voice cracking like a frozen broom, "I'm not sure I should. There was a time, I think, when I first came to Muireann, when I might have told you, and it might have been the right thing. But now—so much time has passed, so many things happened, I think perhaps it is best that this stay dead, closed into a chest between us, fastened with locks."

"What are you talking about, woman? I've left my tavern for you; you might stop your shy-maid act—I know better than to think you're just a net-mender. You talk to that albino girl like she's your confessor, and you won't tell me why you watch me like I'm likely to grow a tail and start howling at the moon?"

Sigrid's face sagged, and she lifted her faded eyes to him, full of pity. She looked like nothing so much as a mother welcoming home a child who has gone far astray and become a stranger to her.

“Understand, please, understand that I never wanted to hurt you…”



When I first became a woman, the limbs were as strange to me as the first taste of wine. For all my days until that one, I had been a bear.

I loved my mother and my Stars, and I loved a young bear with dark eyes, even after he left me. I was never strange, never different from my sisters.

The bear I loved disappeared, and the snow fell, the snow froze, the glaciers broke and re-formed without him. We knew nothing of where he had gone, and after a full turn of seasons without his tracking across our ice, mates were taken again, cubs were nursed. And life went on.

But one evening, when the blue lights of the heavens streamed through the prisms of the Temple, tracing shadows of cobalt and aquamarine across my thick fur, a vision came to me, glimmering on the ice altar with all the weight and depth of flesh. Laakea, the Harpoon-Star, stood before me, with his diamond spear slung over one shoulder, his skin whiter than light itself. His hair flowed over the altar like a frozen waterfall, and I trembled in his presence, terrified and exalted. I was a humble bear, not so very far past my cubhood, and the golden eyes of the Far-Flying Hunter were fixed on me. The honor was beyond bearing.

He told me, Eyvind. He told me that you had been made into a man, that you had sought to avenge the Snake-Star and been changed to keep you from it. It was not your vengeance to take, he said. But he also told me that you would never be bear again—or that it would be so long and at such cost that if you

managed it, it would be worth less than ash. He told me, in a voice like snow, that I would never see you again, that you would never return.

And I wept, my love. I wept at his feet like an infant, and I could not raise my eyes to his beauty.

Laakea put his hands on my shoulders—the ecstasy of it!—and lifted me to his side. He said that if I wished, I could be made a woman myself, so that I could seek you out, find you again, find some happiness. Of course, I wished it! He drew for me a map in the ice, a map through the floes to a great wood at the othermost North of the world, where, he said, roamed a creature who knew something of trading skins.

And he told me nothing else. Not how to find you, or how to stand still while something unstitched my fur and lashed skin in its place.

Yet still, I loved you, and I believed you would want me to come to you. I could not stand the thought of you in misery, separated from your kind. So I went, into the far northern wilds, and I floated across seas so blue they chilled my bones, and frozen trees encased in sheaths of frost. And I came to a wood more vast than any I had ever heard tale of, darker than caverns in its paleness, and deeper, white with snow and terrible in its cold.

I wandered in it, I became lost in it. Perhaps it was an hour, perhaps it was a year. Perhaps it was ten. In the white, time is nothing, and I knew nothing but the winter, the scent of it, tracking it to its source. I followed the smell of ice over pine, over holly berries, of snowshoes slushing through drifts. I followed until I came upon a hunched figure in a frostbitten vulture cloak, whose feathers were gone to crystal and frost. I lumbered up to its silvery form.

"You came looking for Ghassan," the hunchback said. "But I'm not him. I'm Ghassan's girl, Umayma."

I frowned as best a bear can frown. "You don't look like a girl." And indeed, she seemed a wolfish, feral young boy with a cowl carved from a vulture's head, and leathery black legs with talons like a raven's. She stamped them in the snow and ground her pearly teeth, one against the other.

"The wonder of skins is that one need never wear one's own face. You must be weary of yours, or you would not have come looking for Ghassan and found me."

"Not weary, no, but I need another one."

"What sort?"

"A… a human girl."

Umayma pursed her lips. "That's a hard one to come by. Girls guard their skins very well. But I do have one." She pulled a bundle the color of good honey out of a fat leather satchel and held it up thoughtfully.

"Where did it come from?" I asked fearfully. "I wouldn't want to wear a murdered girl's body like a dress."

Umayma smiled and fluffed her vulture-skin. "A skin is a skin, but if you must know…"



THE FIRST THING I REMEMBER IS THE EGG. MY feathers were very black.

Ghassan told me, alone of all his children he confided in me, even when I was so young that yolk still clung to my beak, that he had been born nothing but a bird. A crooked old crow who wanted better for himself, he said.

The first time he changed skins it was quite a surprise—he wrapped himself up in a snake's molting and the molting stuck, like a coat grown suddenly too small to take off. His feathers were a shrugged-off pile of soot on the forest floor, and he never looked back.

After a while he began to seek out skins, and not long after that he developed a reputation—by the time he died he had not had to steal a skin in decades. Rich in skins, my father, which is all the wealth there is. Folk clambered to trade theirs over, and he always ran a brisk business. If a skin was troublesome, he could always get rid of it; if it was rare, he could always procure it. Some thought he was quite wicked, but in truth, he was no more or less than any other crow: enamored of bright new things, and too clever to get them by the usual path.

He taught me the trade. Most of his children were plain crows, dull as dandelions. But I was like him, he said. My heart was skinless, and therefore I could have any skin I wished. But I had no desire to steal skins, as he did, and which he believed was a vital skill, as vital as reading to a cleric. He chided me, yes, called me weak of will, threatened to teach one of his other crow-children if I could not sneak up behind that possum right this second and split it tail to

crown. But I would not. A skin is a sacred thing, more intimate than mother and child, and I wanted to change, of course I wanted to change, to be like Ghassan, but I wanted each of those in whose bodies I nestled to desire the change as much as I did. I searched for a long time, asking this page and that potato farmer whether or not they would like to be a crow, and my father laughed each time they fled in terror or threw stones at me, or politely declined to eat worms and leaves.

But one day, as days will come, I met a girl in the forest, just the sort of girl black and taloned creatures meet in the forest: young and ruddy-cheeked, bright of eye and too curious to take the usual path.

"Hello," I cawed, hopping into her path.

"Hello, old crow," she said pleasantly.

"I'm not old at all, you know. I'm quite young, and my feathers have a lovely sheen."

"They certainly do."

"How would you like to wear them?" I asked, smoothing my voice into a hushed sweetness, like a pond lapping against its green banks.

The girl considered for a moment, twisting her brown ringlets in her fingers. "I think I would like that very much," she said softly. "I think it would be very nice to fly, and the life of a milkmaid is dreadfully dull. One always hopes such opportunities will befall one in the forest, but more often than not, one finds oneself an old grandmother with dragging dugs and a dewlap, her fingers numb from endless udders."

I hopped closer. "Would you let me wear your skin in return?"

She looked down at herself. "Oh, certainly, if you would not find it very plain, and prone to dragging and dewlaps. It is a beastly body in that way. I would not recommend milking cows. It's terrible for the knuckles."

"I shall remember that." I laughed, and we settled about the usual ceremony of stitching and unstitching, in which she was not at all experienced and I was barely adequate, so I am quite certain we made a mess of the whole procedure, but then, one's first time is always a bit awkward, is it not?

She was lovely, and smelled of milk and hay on the inside. She cawed happily and flew off into the pines.

And I began, each time seeking out accord, agreement, not because I thought it wrong to steal—I am still a crow, after all—but because I do not disdain the usual way. Still, I have fallen into my father's profession after all, as folk wish to trade and buy and sell, and I accumulated an excess inventory, and began to be sought after. I developed preferences, as Ghassan did—we both prefer a set of skins to one, and to maintain some of our crow shape in the set. I grew to enjoy wearing a boy's skin, as Ghassan often wore a woman's. Variety is important, you know, and it always pays to display the skins to best effect.

For all I know he is still crouching on his island, the island where I was born, the island where he squats and plays siren, but Ghassan has not been seen in the waking world for many years, and I am the only Skin-Peddler anyone speaks of these days, but they still call me Ghassan—who can tell who is who when our faces change with winter and spring?





"THIS IS THAT FIRST GIRL'S SKIN. I HAVE CARRIED it with me as a kind of souvenir, but I will give it to you, because you are in need, and I would very much like a bear skin."

I pawed the snow. "Umayma, I'm scared."

"It's all right," she said warmly, putting a skeletal hand on my shoulder. "The first time always hurts a little, but it gets easier."

"This will be my only time," I said stiffly.

Umayma scratched her cloak of feathers. "A pity," she sighed.

And then she took me in her boy's arms. I do not know how to say how it was. I felt myself splitting, like a nut in its shell, a fingernail carving the husk open, sugar-blood spilling out. I felt a star open in my chest, burning and searing, tearing the fur and flesh open as if along a seam, stitches popping and snarling. I cried out and my strong legs buckled beneath me, claws skittering on the ice. I could hear the ripping of my skin, then, a wet, sliding sound that brought with it a pain that clouded my eyes and blackened my brain.

And then, the Skin-Peddler was extending her hand to me, and wonderingly I extended my own to meet it—and it was not a paw but a slender girl's hand, with five fingers and dull, ineffective nails in the place of my proud claws. I stood naked before the vulture girl in her boy's skin, suddenly shivering without my fur. The cold was like a throttling—it clutched my throat and clawed my chest. I could not have imagined such a thing as this cold; I had always had my thick pelt to protect me.

And so I went home. My mother shrieked and would not speak to me; her despair coated the house like black honey. My sisters did not know me, and ensconced themselves in the Temple to pray for my soul, not believing for a moment that Laakea had bid me do this thing. Gunde called a Versammlung, but even they could not decide what to do with me. They resolved that I could stay—but if I could manage it, they preferred that I go.

When the wolves came, I went eagerly. There was nothing for me in the North. If I went south with them, surely I would hear word of you, or the Snake-Star. And in a city such as Al-a-Nur, what secret could not be discovered? I could make us both bears again; I could find you wherever you had become lost. Could it hurt if I stole some bit of excitement or adventure for myself while I searched? I set out with a heart high as hearth flame. And when I entered the Tower of St. Sigrid, I told myself, very reasonably, that such knowledge was as likely to be there as anyplace else, such histories, such magic. But in truth, I was enamored of the Saint, and the Dreaming City, and all that had come to pass in the world since you left me. You were already becoming a distant memory, a childhood love. The world had cracked open and shown me wonders—I knew I could not close it again.

I began to forget you, because I thought it best to forget. Another destiny awaited me, and it was not simply to be a bear-wife fishing through the ice.



Eyvind stared, stricken. His eyes were full of tears, his stained shirt clenched in his enormous hands.

"So much happened, my love. I wore this skin until it was so accustomed to me I don't think I could take it off if I wanted to. I searched for years for the Saint, and when I came to Muireann, destitute, in despair, there you were. I knew you in a moment; of course I knew you."

"Then how could you keep this from me?" he blurted, tears springing fresh and rolling down his great face. "For years I waited for the change to come on me again, so that I could be a bear again, and return to the ice, return to you. All along you've been here and said nothing? You are cold, cold and cruel, Ulla."

Sigrid passed a hand over her eyes. "Do not call me that. It is not my name, not anymore. This is my name; this is my face. I am not her, I am Saint Sigrid of the Ways, however you may wish it were otherwise. I set out to find you—but it was truly for *this* I became human. This ship, coursing towards the beast that swallowed my goddess. This was my Quest, not you. When I saw you it only recalled to me all I had failed to do. If I had gone to you then, and tended a tavern with you all those years, perhaps you would have been happy, but it would have put a lie to all my training, all my life since the Skin-Peddler traded my flesh. It would have been the end to my story, and so it would have seemed that I had done all I did only for a husband. It was not the end I wanted. I am not your goal, Eyvind. I am an arrow shot towards Sigrid, and I must find my

mark. The wolf led me astray, don't you see? The wolf led me off the path that wound to you, and into a place of whose jeweled mysteries I could not begin to tell you the first part. I am no longer Ulla—how could I dwell with Eyvind?"

The tavern-keeper's body seemed to dwindle, as if all the blood had run out of him. He put his head in his hands, his fingers in his thinning hair.

"My life has gone so far wrong I can't see the right for miles around. The Marsh King said I would be a man until a virgin was devoured, the sea turned to gold, and saints went west on the wings of henless birds. I believed the old stork—I thought it'd be a few years, no more. It went so fast; one day I was old and fat and the sea was still gray. I told a boy the story once; it seems like ages ago. I thought it would help, to tell someone. That it might hurry things along. But I couldn't tell, not one day did I even think on it, that my love was there, swilling beer in a dark corner. You should have told me, Sigrid." He took a deep, hitching breath. "If you are not my goal, what is?"

"I'm sorry, Eyvind. I truly am. None of this is how I meant it to be. I wanted to greet my captain young and beautiful; I wanted to be her savior. Now I can barely limp towards her on a leaking ship and hope I have the strength to throw myself in the path of the sea-creature."

In the corner of the hold, Snow wept silently, her tears wetting the wood of the softly rocking ship.

The silence between Sigrid and Eyvind was thick and dark as eel flesh for days upon nights. Snow hated the sound of it, echo of it in her ears. She was relieved as an ox without its yoke when Grog upended the last of her rum barrel into her blue mouth, belched forcefully, and bellowed.

"Shell off the port side!"

So it was—Snow could not breathe for her terror as the shell grew in size, black and green and blue and slick as a beetle's body, black and green and blue as the sea careening off of its dome. Its beady, baleful eyes crested the water, blinking their translucent eyelids in the dim sunlight. Grog put on a face of boredom, but beneath the brine, the pale girl could see her tail trembling. Sigrid's face was contorted in fear and ecstasy, and she was gripping Eyvind's

hand with all her strength, whether trying to keep him at her side or anchor herself to the ship, Snow could not tell.

"Grog," Sigrid called out, her voice high and strong, "sail in! Into the mouth!"

The Magyr bolted upright in her tub, her violet tail thrashing. "Are you out of your mind, woman? I've gone this far, but knives or no, that's daft as an empty mug!"

"It's all right!" Sigrid laughed, throwing her head back, her hair streaming like a young girl's. *"Hand in hand they'll come whistling home, the maiden, the bear, and the girl in gray!"*

Snow patted the Magyr's shoulder, which glowed deep turquoise with fear. "I'll do it, Grog. It really will be all right. Probably. Anyway, the song says it will, and songs are usually right." She wrapped her slim fingers like candlewax around the wheel, and Grog lay back in her tub, her ample chest heaving.

"Fanatics!" she muttered, shaking her tattered green head.

The Echeneis's mouth yawned open, and the sea rushed in, past the forest of ivory baleen, the tiny ship buoyed on its crest like a toy boat.

The *Witch's Kiss* disappeared into shadow, like a lantern snuffed out.

In the Garden

"DON'T STOP!" THE BOY GASPED, HIS BREATH COMING QUICK AND fast as a galloping colt. The girl frowned, creases forming in the inky expanse of her eyelids like constellations. Her glance flitted into the chamber, resting on the sleeping form of Dinarzad, whose hands moved fitfully over the bronze keys.

"If I am caught here—"

"I will protect you! I am as brave as any Sigrid! Do you think I can't?"

The girl paused tactfully. "I think that's very brave. But you do not really understand. Have you forgotten that you used to be afraid of me?"

The boy felt his cheeks burn. "Only a little," he mumbled, picking at stray pebbles on the windowsill, trying to imagine that they were Lo Shen pieces. The night was black as saddle oil all around, and only their eyes gleamed.

"She is fast asleep," the boy cajoled, leaning across the window's threshold, close to the girl, until he could smell her wildness, the scent of tree and stone which clung to her. "Tell me the end."



When the shadow and spume cleared from the eyes of the four creatures on board the little ship, the world had changed around them.

This is to say, they had passed into a new world. The belly of the sea-monster was vast, so vast that they could only see the flank which was near to them, ribs curving upward, taller than cathedrals—the other was lost in mist, and the ceiling arched high above them, like a starless sky. The stomach fluid of the beast made an inland sea, its waves green and brown, noxious and steaming. The schooner drifted through the oily waters, pushing aside flotsam with its prow. The smell was of rotting fish and kelp, and skeletons of unnamable things, things that had never seen the sun on the surface of the ocean, floated by as Snow stared over the edge at the hellish soup.

Sigrid did not lean over the rail to gawk at the accumulated trash of a life spent roaming the sea. She had taken the wheel and now looked straight ahead, eyes hawk-wide, at the wreckage laid out before them.

It was a city of skeleton ships, each bobbing in its own rhythm on the bile sea. Some were gray and crumbling with age, bones still gripping the wheel, skulls rolling back and forth over the decks in hypnotic repetition. Others were not so old at all; their paint was still bright in patches, and the figures slumped over the crows' nests and bowsprits were swollen and putrid, swarmed over with flies. The schooner passed without a sound through this necropolis, her crew agape. Eyvind finally covered his eyes when he could witness no more dead.

But Sigrid had fixed her eye on a ship, not far distant. Among all these ghost ships, one still had its lanterns lit, and the orange light spilled out over the brackish water, fire dancing on the slick of the monster's gluttony.

And voices could be heard—cheerful and raucous, shouts of glee and mirth. Snow's heart pounded within her. With aching slowness they drew closer to the mystery ship, and she dared to hope that it would be red, red as old dreams. But when they finally came within full sight of the galleon—for a galleon it was, and as beautiful a ship as had ever been built by hand or bough—it was not red, but white.

The surface of the ship—its beams, its sails and lines, even its figurehead, a woman with the head of a fox, arms extended high into the air to grip the prow in her fists—was caked with barnacles, glutted with them, like a flower in full seed. The living mast was coated in the white miasma, branches choked with it like some foul snowfall. There were not more than patches here and there where the stony shells had not fixed themselves, where the red sheen of the original ship shone through. It was nearly solid, like armor plating on a warhorse, and even Grog looked at the mass of creatures in dismay. Yet, on the deck of the ship many figures could be seen moving about, seemingly perfectly healthy and hale.

And from the bow, a woman's head appeared, a figure in leather breeches and a billowing white tunic, with skin the color of myrrh. Her tawny eyes were framed by dark hair which fell to her waist and gleamed like nothing so much as a great store of costly spices—and it was knotted through with gold, strung through ornate braids like beads. Just behind her stood a shadowy woman whose very skin seemed to be aflame, her fiery hand poised on the hilt of an enormous sword. But the dark-headed woman beamed at them, her face open and warm. She put her hand on her girlish hip and grinned at the newcomers.

"Welcome to the underworld!" she said with a laugh.

And it was then that Sigrid finally did begin to weep, brought face-to-face with her Saint at last.

"That *is* an odd reaction, if I may say so," Saint Sigrid remarked, and gestured for two of her women to lay a plank across the two ships so that the newcomers could come aboard.

"The *Maidenhead,*" Sigrid whispered, in awe as her foot rested on the famed ship's decks, encased as they were in stony white.

"Well, isn't that interesting? You must be one of the Sigrids." The Saint looked mildly disapproving, as if stepping delicately over a drunken priest slumped over in her path. Sigrid stared.

"You know about the Tower?" she gasped.

"Tower? No, I don't know of any tower, but that little cult was springing up even before I became a permanent passenger in this roving whale-turtle. They're tiresome, but what can I say to dissuade them? Whenever one does extraordinary things, someone is bound to try to repeat them for themselves. It's the way of the world."

Sigrid looked as though she had been slapped. "I have searched my life over for you, for the Saint of the Griffins, of the Boiling Sea, of the Red Ship. I have never tried to repeat your miracles. I have performed my own. I have only tried to be like you in spirit, to be brave, and noble, and to find my place in the world. To find you."

The Saint leaned in close to Sigrid, her face as round and ruddy as the day she vanished, and laid one finger aside her nose, her mouth spreading into a conspiratorial smile.

"Gods are always a disappointment," she clucked.

Grog whipped her tail noisily through her brine, demanding attention like a kid who cannot reach her dam for the suckling of her siblings.

"I don't rightly care who you are, you fancy sea dog. Your ship looks like it fell bow-first into a barrel of old cheese. Not what I'd call prime captain-ship, you know, Saint or not."

The Saint glanced dismissively at Grog's gesticulating tail. "Misadventures at sea are as common as apples in autumn…"



Long-Eared Tomomo was the first captain of this ship—we carved that figurehead to remember her—but I'd wager at least one of you already knows that. She was a fine woman, and I loved her. But a fox's place isn't really at sea, any more than it's in a Palace. She gave the wheel over to me after we had been on the waves together for many a year, despite many other women being senior to me. She said that a lady should always leave her worldly goods to a daughter, not an aunt or even a sister. She touched my hair, just a moment's touch, and went into the forest when we made port, with a bag of gold under each arm.

I never saw her again, and the *Maidenhead* was mine.

And for a while, our lives were bright as moon reflected in black water.

I suppose it was my fault. I became convinced that we were charmed, that Tommy had gifted us with her fox-magic before she left our berths, and like that clever, black-nosed fox, we would never be caught. My first mate, Khaloud, was always the best of us when it came to finding treasure for us to plunder, and she usually tried to make sure that it was ill-gotten, so that we could sleep easy. It is a talent of the Djinn; they can smell gold like game in a wood. Unsurprisingly, it was a great number of Djinn, led by the great Kashkash, who founded the city of Shadukiam in all its jewel-drenched glory. Or so they claim. I have never heard the name of Kashkash except that Khaloud swore by him constantly.

It was night, after our dinner of roast pork and fresh apples plundered from the stores of some local governor or another, that Khaloud took watch with me. We stood in our customary place, smoking—I with my whalebone pipe and she with the little silver one she had brought with her from the Rose Domed city. In the evening, she cuts quite a figure, with her hair of smoke and spark, her fiery skin banked to a contented glow. Her eyes could still scald me like a pair of hot tongs, though—and so they did that evening when she told me of her latest scheme.

"It would be easy, Sigrid. Easier than stealing corn from a crow. There is no one to guard it but an old woman with a lame leg—she couldn't even hobble after us. And the stories I've heard about the treasure she keeps! A magic satchel, plain leather on the outside, but within, a supply of gold that never runs dry! By the beard of Kashkash! What madness it would be if we did *not* seek it out?"

I drew deeply on my pipe. "Khaloud, heart of my heart, I know your lust for coin has never failed us, but this sounds like a child's story. We have had a good year. Why go chasing after magic purses when our own, very real purses are full?"

"Do you believe that the purse which brims today will brim for all time? Perhaps you can sleep sweetly, believing it is summer. But my duty does not let me rest, and I must see after our purses in winter, as well. And as for magic and children, here we stand on a ship whose mast bears oranges and pomegranates for our pleasure, and a woman of fire speaks to the mother of Griffins."

"As ever, you are wiser than I, you old genie. May the Stars grant that you are always here to look after me."

"Are you taking up religion in your old age, then, Captain?"

"Hardly. Habit, my love, habit."

Thus it was that we set out for a small island in the midst of a murky, misty bay, as they all are, a rocky, barren place full of slate and basalt, festooned with silver clams and deep blue mussels clinging to the sea-worn stones. In the center of the island was a hut, and that was all that marked out this island from

hundreds of other dead reef-shards floating in the ocean. Khaloud had traded a vial of her heartsfire for the chart, and when we saw the pitiful little house, we called that too highly bought. There would be hardly a need for blades; I took only my Djinn ashore. How foolish I was—but it seemed such a desolate place. The wretched hut was thatched in straw and leaves, and poorly thatched at that, as haphazard and tangled as a bird's nest. Its walls were wattle-and-daub, stinking of dung. It rested on splayed feet that seemed to be a pelican's or a heron's, the talons gripping slick rocks for purchase.

And sitting in its doorway was an ancient woman, her lap full of clapping mussels.

Her head was bent so that Khaloud and I could not see her face, a mass of ash gray hair snarling from the crown of her head to her heels. But behind her arms, the crone had long black wings; at their crest bunched small clasping claws which were something like hands, and at her calves began leathery black talons which were something like feet. The feathers gleamed in the sun and seaspray. Her clothes were ragged, falling apart, no more than a few strips of animal pelts stitched together with sinew. She grumbled as we approached, and slurped the orange flesh from a mussel, pitching the empty shell straight past my head.

"Old woman!" Khaloud announced, speaking before I could. She often did that, so that if some hapless soul were to become enraged with us, they would leap at her before they would cut my own throat. "We've come for the satchel. You can give it to us, or we can take it from you, as you like, but by the flame of Kashkash, we'll have it."

The old woman tossed another shell, which struck the Djinn directly between the eyes.

"Oh, yes," the crone growled. "Come and rob an old lady's chest of drawers, eh? So easy to do, is it not? Her bones are chicken-brittle, they'll snap so sweet it's almost music." She chuckled deep in her throat. "Only I am not such an easy mark, my beautiful peacocks, oh, no."

She straightened her hunched back then, the mussels spilling out of her lap and skittering across the rocks. She stood up and threw her head back, and we saw with horror that the face beneath was not withered with age or strung with spittle—it was not even middle-aged, but a hale and grinning man whose

eyes flashed black and silver. The mass of hair streamed back over his shoulders, tumbling past his knees. He fluffed his wings impressively—and slung over one feathered shoulder was a fat leather satchel, bulging like a wineskin.

"Is this what you want, then? A couple of girls playing pirates come to take it from old Ghassan, eh, weak and helpless as he is? Yes, you and many others before you. And I'll give it to you, without even a fight, if you can match me drink for drink the whole night through. I'm a sporting man, after all."

I considered for a moment, sure that he had more tricks than simply costumes. "You'll swear to me that the purse is magical?" I asked.

"Oh, aye! It is at that. Now, are you coming in—and just you, mind you; I've no mind to go gambling with fire-demons—or are you going back to your ship to tell your crew you couldn't contend with a meek old woman?" He waggled the satchel mockingly from one of his three-fingered claws and strode back into his hut.

Khaloud looked sidelong at me with those coal-eyes of hers, and pulled a tiny vial from her belt. "Heartsfire," she whispered, her voice like the last wisps of smoke from a doused fire. "This very morning I bled it from my wrist. A drop in the drink and he'll fall like a rock dropped from a Castle tower."

I took the dusky orange liquid and slid it into my sleeve, sharing a familiar smirk. And, as full of folly as a maid who milks a bull, I followed Ghassan into his stinking house.

A low table was set with clay cups and a large pitcher the color of birds' tongues. Ghassan sat on one side of it, his wings folded neatly at his sides, beaming at me.

"Well done! Have a seat, my girl, and try my best vintage. Brewed from mussel shells and livers—best the islands have to offer."

I knelt and cast my eyes down in demure submission. "Among my people, it is customary for the female to serve. Will you allow me?"

For a moment he looked suspicious and I was sure he would refuse. But it is difficult for men to disbelieve a woman who insists that she wishes to serve them, and he nodded assent. I took the two glasses and filled them with the

sickly liquor, which flowed out thickly, a viscous yellow slime. And, letting my sleeves droop ever so slightly over them, I let three drops from the vial drip into his drink. He took it with pleasure in his stunted hand and quaffed it in one gulp.

"My appetite is famed the world over," he leered.

"As is the fact that you are an old woman with bad knees," I countered, and quaffed my own mussel brew.

We had drunk only three times before Ghassan began to reel on the floor, his eyes rolling in his head. I had not even begun to feel dizzy, and he appeared to be ready to vomit, or faint, or both.

"You cheated!" he gasped, clutching his belly.

I stood and laughed at him. "Even pretty girls playing at pirates know how to play them well."

Ghassan grunted, drooling a bit out of the side of his mouth, and lay down heavily, eyes drooping, his feathers crunching beneath him. "Take the satchel then, you lying wench. I hope you enjoy its fruits!" And with that, his body slackened and his great head with its crown of matted hair crashed to the floor. His snoring filled the little house like a storm beating at windows. I bent and slung the satchel from his body, pleased with myself—a simple ruse, quickly accomplished.

I knew nothing.



When I returned to the *Maidenhead* with Khaloud, the crew greeted us with cries of triumph. They crowded around, eager to see the purse perform its magic. I held it over my head for all to see, then thrust my hand inside the thick leather to bring out the first handful of gold.

But when I pulled my hand from the satchel, there was no coin in my fist. Instead, my hand was fouled by a thick white ooze; it clung to my skin, my

fingers, like a snail's body. A great clump of it had come away from the satchel, and now the leather sack was full of it, overflowing with pale sludge, splashing thickly onto the deck. I wiped my hand quickly on the wheel, disgusted by the stuff, which reeked of fish and salt. And then I saw—we all saw. The slime was hardening, wherever it fell, and spurting from the satchel like a fountain. It had already covered half the ship as thick as snowfall, bubbling into strange egglike shapes and stiffening into the familiar gray-white rocks of barnacles.

Of course I ordered the girls to get the decks clean of it, but nothing they did was of any help, even when they fell to hacking at it with their swords. We were halfway out of the bay by the time the red ship was red no more, and all of us in a panic. Halfway out of the bay when Ghassan woke—too strong, it seemed, to fall beneath Khaloud's fire for long—and came screeching out of his hut.

"Go! Go! You stupid hens! Carry them as far as you can, carry my babies until they use your ship as a nursery and foul it with their first dung! Fools! Steal from an old woman and see what you get! Thieves! Villains! I hope they tear open your livers for their birthday breakfasts!"

Sick with dread, Khaloud and I stood at the bow of my once-beautiful ship, and stared after the bird-creature, who cawed and flapped his huge black wings, cackling in the stiff wind.



"It was not long after we left Ghassan that we encountered the Echeneis—that is not a very interesting story, no story involving a sea-monster is. A ship meets the monster; it either escapes or is devoured. We were swallowed whole, and found ourselves on this strange sea. But somehow, time is stretched here, and it has been hundreds of years. Hundreds of years and the barnacles have not hatched, we have not aged much, nothing has changed. We have eaten the creatures the Echeneis eats, and you would be surprised how many seals and sharks it has swallowed. We have never wanted for food. And from time to time, there have been other ships. But none who sought us out, as you did."

The shadowy woman sidled up to the Saint and kept her hand on the hilt of her sword. Snow knew her immediately by her fiery skin: Khaloud.

"Your timing," she said throatily, in a voice like flames rippling, "could almost be called providential. Can you not see the creatures stirring in their eggs? The birth is coming; I would swear it by the lamp of Kashkash."

"Indeed, it is. Within the day, I think—I do have some experience with hatching birds. The barnacles have never been so large, and we can see blackness fluttering within." The Saint looked critically at the four strangers. "We have decided to attempt our escape. Will you help us or hinder us?"

Sigrid seemed to stifle the urge to fall to her knees. "Anything I can do, I will do, my lady."

Grog belched. "Well, we haven't got any choice, have we?"

"You old trout!" a voice came from belowdecks, quickly followed by a body —a woman with the tail of a wolf, the haunches of a deer, and bright blue wings. Magadin strode across the ship to the Magyr's tub, her gray eyes blazing.

"I thought I told you to see my ship safe home! You brought her back here to get chewed to pieces?" she bellowed.

"What? Look, this lot kidnapped me!" Grog looked away, nervously, picking at the scales of her violet tail. "I was going to take it back, I swear. But they made me come back, and shouldn't you thank me for keeping her bow and stern attached as well as I have? And besides, I hardly expected you to survive, did I? And dead women don't complain."

Khaloud frowned. "We fished her out of the bile half dead, but taking on monsters is a sacred duty left to us by old Tomomo—we pressed her into service, and she is with us now."

Magadin hooked her shaggy arm around the Djinn's smoky waist. "It is pleasant to be part of a crew, and not manning every sail yourself. Part of a crew and not a prisoner, not a maiden, not cargo. I died in the whale and washed up on the deck of paradise. This is the best death I could have asked for, and I hope to stay dead for a long while." She smiled, and her tail wagged, and there was no weariness left in the lines of her face.

"Now that we're all family," growled Eyvind, "hadn't we better see about getting ourselves retched out of this beast?"

"An excellent suggestion," the Saint said.

Within a few hours, both ships had drawn back through the sea of bile, close to the mouth of the Echeneis. Eyvind and Grog had stayed aboard the beast-maid's ship, while Sigrid and Snow were huddled close with the pirates. Baleen hung in the distance like a glossy door, and they could hear the sea crashing outside.

"First we must raise the monster," said the Saint in a hushed voice. "Khaloud?"

The Djinn drew a dark, curved bow back almost into the shape of a full moon, and lit the arrow from her belly. She fired it directly up into the whale-

turtle's mouth—and for a moment, it simply disappeared into the mist and there was no sound. But then—a dull clunking noise echoed through the mouth and the creature moaned in pain, ascending through the waters to destroy whatever had troubled it.

"How can we be sure they will hatch?" Snow whispered, clutching Sigrid's hand to calm her heart.

The Saint looked grim and glad all at once, drawing a dagger from a sheath bound to her thigh. "We aren't going to let them dawdle. The eggs should be weak enough now for them to break out—or for us to break in. Get yourself a knife, girl."

Grog hollered at Eyvind to drag her to the side of the ship and began to smash the barnacle-eggs with hurled harpoons. Every creature on the *Maidenhead* was slashing, clawing, cutting, crushing the eggs. Khaloud flicked her fingers at one after the other, engulfing them in little orange flames. The sickening crunch of it made Snow gag, and the smell was worse, like overripe meat. At first it was slow, just a few black infants hopping out of their shells—but then the roaring sound of thousands of wings filled the mouth of the Echeneis, doubled and tripled with echoes.

It was the Saint who laughed first—and then the Djinn joined her. They saw, and soon all could see, a great flock of crows rising from the ruined barnacles, their huge wings flapping noisily, like pages turning. More and more of them shattered their eggs of their own accord, eager to join their siblings. Countless wings beat against the wall of baleen, the arched roof, the cheeks of their prison. The mouth was filled with them as if with a draught of fouled wine, and the monster began to roar in rage, a guttural sound like the earth opening.

And it did open. The Echeneis's jaws cracked slightly, and a blinding sliver of light seared across the two ships. The sliver became a wash as the mouth opened wide and the sea rushed in, sparkling blue and gray and white, buffeting the ships on its waves. There was a great cheer from the crew of the *Maidenhead,* and the sails were drawn tight. Eyvind wrestled the rigging of the other vessel, and when the sea flowed out again, they rode the crest of the foam out into the sun and the world again.





With them, thousands upon thousands of gleaming black crows streamed out of the mouth of the Echeneis, heralding the ships and following them, soaring up and out of the whale like an exhalation of dark angels. The sound of their flapping wings was like grapeshot; the sunlight caught their feathers and glowed deep violet against the pale sky. The monster groaned, almost a whimper, and sank again below the surface as the ships sped away from it with taut sails.

And so, as quickly as the birth began, it was finished. The red ship and the brown floated together in the broad light some space away from the place where the monster had submerged, lashed together so that farewells could be made. A few lingering crows circled overhead.

The sun was setting over the sea, its light pooled over the water, unfurling itself like a glove, staining the water a perfect shade of gold, as if a lady had dropped her best necklace into the depths. The golden light flooded over the deck of the *Maidenhead,* and Eyvind's eyes filled with tears.

"The virgin was devoured," he said wonderingly, gesturing at the red ship, "the saints will go west with henless eggs, and the sea," his voice tightened, "has gone to gold."

Eyvind seemed to shimmer and to wriggle, like a worm spasming on a hook —and then there was no Eyvind at all any longer. A great white bear stood in his place, tears streaming from its large black eyes. Its fur was smooth and snowy, illuminated with light and sea spray. The timbers groaned under the sudden weight. Sigrid cried out and crossed the plank from the red ship to the *Witch's Kiss,* sinking to her knees and touching his furry face.

The bear closed his eyes, and laid his head heavily in his lover's lap.

"It's happened." He sighed, his voice changing to something deeper and rougher now that it was his own again, more growl than tongue. "And now we can go home. At last, we can go home. We will go to Skin-Peddler, and you will ask for your skin again, and we will go back to the snows and the wilds, together. It's over."

Sigrid took her hands away slowly. "No, Eyvind. I cannot. I am not Ulla, and I will never be again. I go with my Lady, as I was meant to. *The maiden, the bear, and the girl in gray.* You must find your own way now."

"Do not leave me, Bear-wife. All I have done has been for you." He lifted his limpid eyes to her, stricken.

"All you have done, you have done for yourself, so that you could live again as you thought you should. I cannot be a part of that dream—all I have done I have done by instinct and desire, save for what I have done for *her*. She is the object of my Quest, and I cannot reject it now. I feel as though I am being split apart again, my skins warring with each other. But I'm sorry, my love. There is just no getting any of it back."

She stood and stroked his coarse white head, bent and kissed it, her tears wetting the fur through. He begged her, and clutched at her uselessly with his clumsy paws.

"Where will I go? What will I do?" he whispered hopelessly.

Sigrid shook her head, unable to give an answer. She crossed back to the red ship with its carpet of broken shells. The Saint embraced her, and Sigrid came away from that embrace glowing like a new bride.

"Come on, then, Bear," Grog said with a sigh, sprinkling a bit of brine over her chest. "Seems you and I are going home lonesome. Snow, get on the boat, child. I've no taste for blubbering send-offs."

But Snow, her pale hair catching the last light of the sun, stepped backwards into Sigrid's arms. "I'm staying," she said uncertainly. "Muireann is not my home. There is nothing for me there. If the captain will take me, I will call this ship mother and father. Perhaps some morning I will wake up and my body will have flushed dark and rose again." She smiled, and the smile warmed her face like a swinging lantern.

"Of course we'll take you," the Saint said. "Tommy bade us never turn away a recruit—we are a family of monsters, and the birth of new beasts is a cause for

joy. There is so much for us to do—the sea and the tide are ours again."

The planks were unlashed and the ships separated like twins within their mother's womb. The *Maidenhead* sailed west, her sails blazing with light. Grog and Eyvind remained on the dilapidated *Witch's Kiss,* turning east, away from the sun and into the gloomy twilight. The Magyr looked after the bear, who stood on the foredeck, staring after the red smear of the receding ship, his great shoulders slumped in grief.

"Come on, love," she said, feeling strangely tender suddenly, "I'll take you home."

"Muireann is not my home, either. But I am not monster enough, it seems, to be offered a place at sea." Grog searched for a grain in the boards, uncomfortable with his mourning.

"Then I'll take you north, Evvy," she said brightly, her voice like buttered rum. "To your real home. You can go back now, right, and rest with your own people? That's something, don't you think? Don't you miss the Stars a-shining on the glaciers, like a thousand candles?"

Eyvind turned his ursine head towards her. "I do," he admitted.

"Then I steer north, old bear. And when you've felt the snow beneath your paws again, the world won't seem so black. At least, that's my guess. Who can tell with your lot?" Grog ran a hand through her green hair.

The white bear walked gingerly over the decks to her tub and settled his bulk down next to it. He laid his head on the wooden rim, and, as the last ribbons of day unwound from the sky, slept.

In the Garden

Dawn stole through the violet curtains, staining them red as calf's blood. The girl sat on the damp grass, her face ringed in orange and gold, smiling up at the boy as he sat in his window, shaded from the warm day which still grew, like a fat child.

"That was a wonderful story!" he cried, a little too loudly. The girl hushed him, leaping up and laying her finger over his lips. He thrilled at her touch, like dry wood touched by a spark. They looked at each other for a moment, her dark-rimmed eyes seeming to swallow him until he saw the sun no more, only those twin moons, shadowed and secret.

She took her hand from his face and stretched her limbs like a young lion. "Yes, and I shall tell you another even more strange and wonderful tomorrow, if you will return to the Garden, to the night, and to me…"

She turned and ran back up the cypress path, past the stable, and into the rows of dew-strung apple trees, her gray skirts trailing behind her.

The boy shivered with delight, his skin full of gooseflesh in the chill morning, and climbed back beneath his furs to dream of a red ship sailing into the sun.

Dinarzad lay awake, still as death in her bed, and her eyes were full of tears.

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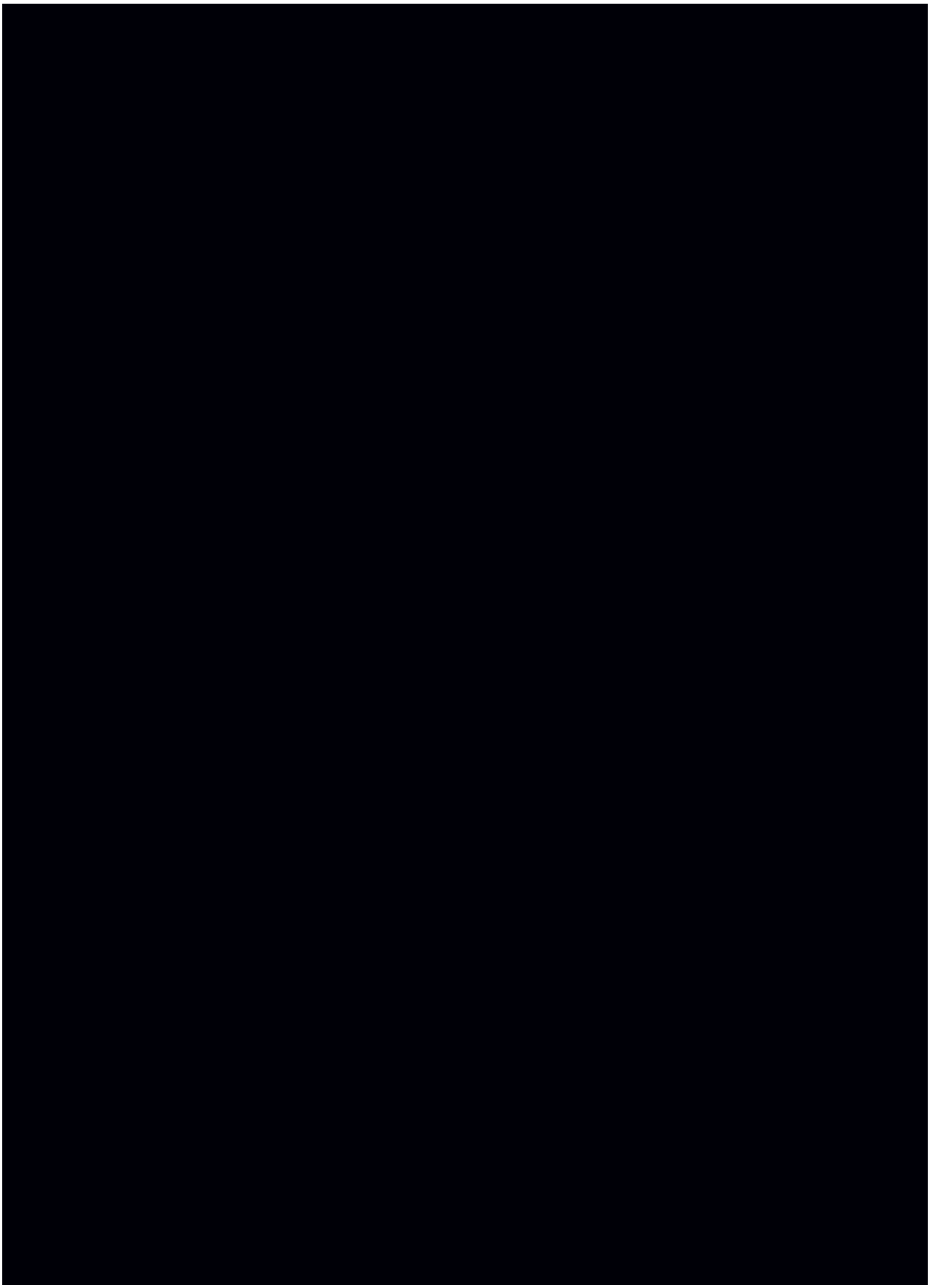
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IN THE CITIES OF COIN AND SPICE

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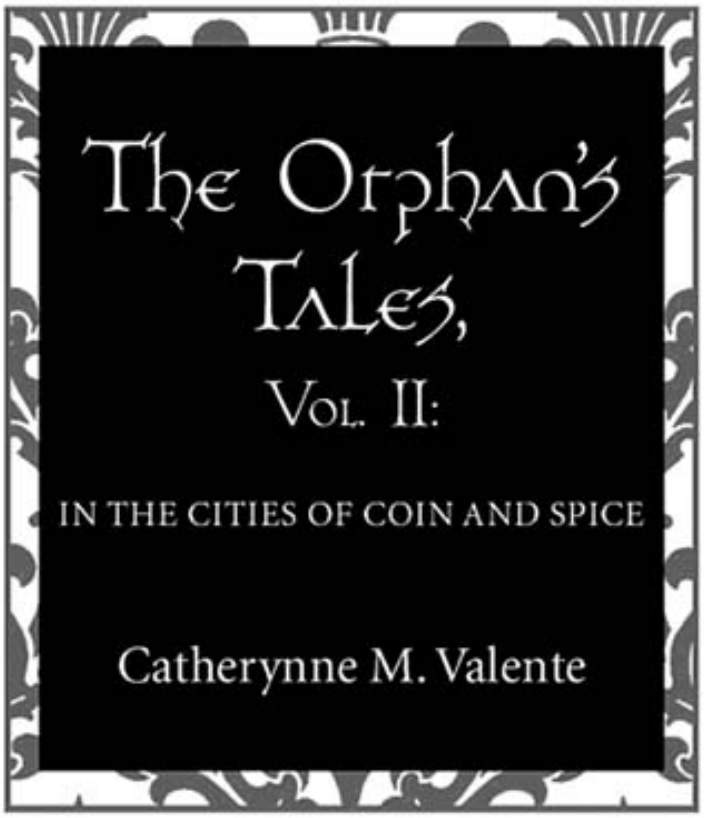


CATHERYNNE M. VALENTE

AUTHOR OF IN THE NIGHT GARDEN

AUTHOR OF *IN THE NIGHT GARDEN*





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Acknowledgments
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For Sarah, who,
when she was older,
wanted the World.


The Book
of the
Storm

In the Garden

The paths of the Garden were wet with fallen apples and red with their ruptured skin. Rag-clothed winds trailed over grass blanched of green; scarlet swallowed up the thrashing trees until all the many groves stood in long rows like bouquets of bloody flowers with long, black stalks.

It was the girl's favorite time—food was never so easy to find, and the air was filled all through day and night with the flapping and fluttering of wings as crows circled south and geese fled even farther into the warm belly of the world. In the autumn her skirt was always full of pomegranates and grackle-eggs, and though the air was colder, the leaves' color did not lie, and they warmed her like a fire beneath a squat iron pot.

It was from the blazing boughs of a cinnamon tree that she saw through the high windows of the women's quarters in the palace. Her palms were henna-dusted by the perfumed bark, and she sucked the last of the morning's golden yolk from her fingers, now flavored with spice. She kept well behind the skein of leaves as she looked through the arched window, at the woman sitting within, her back straight as an ax-handle, and so still, though hands flashed over her and voices clicked and hushed in her pretty ears. A dozen maids held the woman's long black hair out taut, and slowly, with infinite patience, threaded tiny white pearls onto the inky strands, one by one, as though the woman were a necklace in a jeweler's workshop.

Dinarzad was to be wed.

Surely one or two of the Sultan's daughters were married every year, and the girl paid them much less attention than she did the family of doves that returned to the same birch trees each spring—but she could not help knowing of this one. Gardener and groundskeeper talked of nothing else: Flowers were coaxed and coddled long past their blooming, trees trained to canopies, fruits culled in great piles, like many-colored snowdrifts, and sent wagon by wagon to the kitchens, only to return to the courtyard as pies and pastries and jams and cakes—for Dinarzad wished to be married in the Garden.

It was unseemly, to be married without a roof over one's head, but she had insisted, even wept, and finally it was decided that a roof of trees was not in its nature different from a roof of wood, and the delicate copse of chestnuts before the great courtyard had had their branches lashed and tied and dragged into the shape of a small, narrow chapel. As they climbed their ladders to wheedle and prune the trees into holiness, the gardeners grumbled to the girl that she ought to be especially careful not to be seen, since the Palace was leaking out of its walls for the pleasure of a spoilt *amira*.

In her deep blue cushions, Dinarzad stared into the mirror as she was strung with pearls for the engagement feast, implacable, canvas-blank—and the girl stared into the princess. Still as an owl, she watched the women whose hands were full of the white jewels, watched the decorated Dinarzad like a tall mirror, until the pearl-keepers led their charge away down the stone stairs, her hair trailing behind her like a shred of sky glittering with stars. The girl touched her own hair without meaning to, hair no less black than the other woman's, but tangled and strung through with hazel-husks.

Below her, the tree shook suddenly, and she was shaken from her contemplation of Dinarzad's unmovable face. She glanced down to the apple-smattered path, and saw the boy staring up at her. He grinned sidelong at her, but his mouth was tired at the edges, like a slice of orange beginning to brown. She scrambled lightly down the trunk and gave him a smile small as a secret. The boy was dressed for the feast and obviously uncomfortable in stiff gold fabric and green silks, uncomfortable, especially, with the thin band of porphyry circling his wrist, which marked him to anyone who cared for such codes as the heir to the Sultanate.

The girl did not care. But she allowed that it was a lovely shade of purple.

“How did you get away?” she asked softly. “Surely everyone will want to squeeze your arms and tell you what a fine man you’re growing up to be.”

The boy snorted like a half-grown bull. “At a wedding, the girl on the dais is the only thing anyone cares to squeeze. It’s the same at every dinner until the wedding.”

“Who is marrying her?” She did not want to be interested. She told herself she was not.

“How should I know?” He kicked at a rotted apple near his slippered toe. “Some prince or soldier or prince who was a soldier or soldier who became a prince. I can’t even remember their names. They all came with chests of opals and baskets of trained songbirds tied together by ribbons of her favorite color and mechanical golden roosters that crowed when you wound their tails—I rather liked that one—and someone chose, though I’m sure it wasn’t her. I do know she’s not to be his first wife; he has two already, but no children at all. He must have brought something very nice in his barrels—I don’t know; he wasn’t the one with the roosters.”

The boy frowned into the wind and scratched at his collar. “I have to dress like a doll just to watch her eat,” he mumbled. “And this thing has no pockets at all—I couldn’t even bring you anything.”

“That was never necessary, you know,” the girl demurred. “I have enough, I’ve always had enough, even if my enough and yours are as different as an elephant and a minaret.”

Her black-rimmed eyes flickered to the earth and back to the boy, and she took him gently by the hand, away from the open paths and into the interior Gardens, past the marble benches and fountains, past the over-picked orchards and the over-pressed grapevines to a clutch of stones so thick with moss that they seemed to be the bodies of long-dead tigers or leopards, whose fur still grew and grew after they had perished. In their long shadows the children were spared the winds, though the girl breathed into her hands to warm her bloodless fingers and the boy’s hems were soaked through with dew and old rain. But he did not seem to notice them—he was plucking at his rich vest and looking curiously at the girl.

“You know,” he said shyly, “I think I could bring you a dress.”

The girl laughed again.

“I have dozens of sisters with hundreds of dresses—they would never notice one gone missing, I know it. It would be warm, and softer than that old rag.”

The girl glanced at the frayed fabric that fashioned her skirt, and shook her head. “What would I do with a dress like theirs? You might as well sew my hair with pearls. No, if I am cold, I have blankets of leaves and my birds. I am not one of them, and it would be silly to dress up a camel in lace and bells and jewels. You would do it only to laugh at the poor beast.”

They said nothing for a moment, and the boy was ashamed—but he saw the gooseflesh on her shoulders, and the bruised color of her frozen toes. The sky was deepening toward evening, gray and yellow against the wild colors of the Garden, light slowly wandering away from the clouds—and he knew enough of proud young girls not to argue about the dress.

“Is there… is there more?” the boy finally blurted, fidgeting with his bracelet.

“Oh, yes.” The girl laughed. “There is always more.”

The girl leaned her head against the springy moss and closed her eyes, the stains on them showing full and dark as ever. She began to speak in a half-whisper, like breath leaving a glass flute.

“I will tell you a story from the crease of my right eye.

“Once, there was a long, lonely shore, gray as it is possible for gray to dream of, and the lonely shore ringed a lonely lake, whose water was black as it is possible for white to fear. And in this lake was a dim, wooded island, far off from the shore. There was a ramshackle dock on the shoals, and a ferry, little more than a raft of ash-wood and a long pole, which was dragged back and forth through the silent water by a tall man in a coarse brown cloak—or he might have been tall, if he were not afflicted with a stooping hunch, which the cloak served to hide. To this ferry, and this dock, and this lake, and this island, and this long, lonely shore came a troubled young man who had but one thin and sallow-elbowed arm, and he was the seventh son of a seventh son, so naturally, he was named Seven…”

THE TALE OF THE CROSSING

THE PEBBLED BEACH WAS WET AND COLD, EACH gray stone slick with rain and lake and mist. Nothing grew save a thin green mold at the water's edge, no sandpipers pecked at the shore for mites or worms, no cattails knocked against the bitter and scentless wind. Two figures were black against the heavy woolen sky, which leaked a slow, sullen light like wrung sweat. The shapes were featureless save for their curved backs—the one hunched and bone-twisted, the other bent under his satchel. Slowly the one approached the other, until from a distance there was but one great black shape where the two men met and spoke.

The younger man looked up at the ferryman, whose face was scored with lines like a constellation chart, though his eyes and hair were as black as if he had been born only a winter past. Even with his warped spine, he was still a massive creature, leaning against his saw-hewn pole and frowning at shadows moving on the brackish water.

"If you want to cross, it'll have to be now, son. The storm comes through three times a day, and the last gale of the evening is due through sooner than you'd like to know."

The young man frowned and reached into his sleeve with his right hand—for the left sleeve was empty. With his good fingers he pulled a patched purse from the sleeve and clumsily extracted a single coin. He held it against the pad of his hand with a bitten thumb, held it as though it weighed heavier than iron: a small, pale coin, yellowed by many handlings, with a seal stamped onto it,

something like a seven-pointed star writhing with spiders. He moved his thumb over it, and sniffed the cold mist. He held it out to the ferryman, staring at him flatly, as though daring him to refuse.

The ferryman did not reach for it. His eyes flickered from the boy's face to his empty sleeve to his fare. Finally, he sighed, a light, rasping sound, like a bird's wings rubbing together. "I know what that is, boy."

Seven snorted. "Is it enough, old man?"

"It is worlds more than enough, and nowhere close to it. But I will take it."



Seven slowly relinquished his coin, rubbing it again with his thumb before handing it over, and climbed onto the ferry, balancing himself as the boards adjusted to his weight. As he settled himself down, he glanced at the hulking figure pulling the pole from its anchor. The ferryman's shabby cloak shifted with his motions, and Seven thought he saw—only for a moment, of course—a green-black glint of claw flash in and out beneath the frayed fabric, which barely served to cover the man's chest. Seven shook his head and called himself a fool of the fog, leaning back against the makeshift mast, whose sail was so torn and ruined that the ferryman had seemingly given up on it and lashed it to the shaft, useless as a two-legged horse.

The pole guided them smoothly through the vast lake, though it must have been very deep, and the staff seemed not at all equal to its work. For a time they sat in silence, pilot and passenger. Finally, the ferryman swallowed thickly and spoke:

"Where did you get that coin? It is not a thing you should own, a young thing like you."

The lake slid around the pole like old oil. Seven chuckled, and his chuckle was not unlike his rasping cough. His stare was blank and tired. "I am not so young as all that."

"The lake is wider than you think," the ferryman said. "The water warps the distance like a folded mirror. We have time together, you and I, and I am neither mute nor deaf. I am called Idyll, by those who have gotten into the

habit of calling me things—and I would know where a boy no grander or taller than any partridge-farmer got hold of *dhheiba*." He spat the last word like a lump of tooth from his mouth, and it lay between them, glinting and garish.

"Where does any man find money?" Seven sighed, looking out over the gray water and the tips of bare trees in the distance. "Ask where an Ajan three-piece comes from, the answer is obvious. Ask where Shaduki silver was minted—you have answered your own question in the asking. Ask after my dhheiba—it must be plain what I will answer. I have been to the city of Marrow, and I have come out again…"

THE TALE OF THE TWELVE COINS

My brothers were all grown, bull-broad and earnest as grass, when I was born. I hardly knew them—but my mother held me to her breast as though she had never had another son, as though six other mouths had not pulled at her, as though twelve other little red hands had not clutched at her hair. My father gave me a number instead of a name and returned to his cups.

Of course, as a boy I understood nothing but that my mother loved me and my father did not—my little heart could not begin to grasp that both her embraces and his wine-sopped silence were rooted in the same day, a day that sunk ahead of them like a pit in soft earth. I could not know that for nine months they had prayed for a girl, eaten mashed snake-innards and washed my mother's belly in hidden springs. But another son came, and my parents were always pilgrim-pious and honest as ants.

Among my people a seventh-seventh son is a mark of grace, and grace must be answered; grace must be paid for. On the boy's seventh birthday, he is laid out on the hillside, lashed to the earth by five white-wood pegs, and left to the favor of the Stars. The seventh son pays for the eighth, and the ninth, and the first grandson, and the fifth granddaughter. A fair trade, don't you think? One child for dozens, dozens, all lined up and waiting to be born while that little boy lies on the mound, shivering in the rain.

It is always done this way, and if any hut full of dirt-farmers were to withhold the sky's due, it would not have been mine.

So my mother kissed me and my father refused to look at me and she had to tie me down all by herself, far off from our fields, her hands shaking as she put the stakes into the soft earth and knotted the ropes as tight as she dared, and I told her she didn't have to, we could tell everyone there had been another son before me, stillborn, and that was good enough for the Stars, one gray, dead baby was good enough, and I wasn't a seventh son at all, I was an eighth boy, and a good boy, and she didn't have to leave me there, where it was so dark, so dark and cold. She cried when she kissed my forehead for the last time, awkwardly lying over my splayed body, trying to hold me. Her tears rolled down my face, onto my lips, and they were all the water I had. She told me that no one knew what happened to the seventh sons—maybe it was something wonderful, something special. But her eyes were dead, and I couldn't look at her while she lied.

After a while, she left, and I looked up into the Stars, which I did not believe were alive—how could I? It was ridiculous. What sort of Stars wanted boys to eat? Or if they did not want us for dinner, to pull their oxcarts or pick their cherries or whatever chores a Star might have to do. The Stars, the living Stars, were children's stories, and I was no child. No one would do this to a child, so I must have been a man. And men are brave, even in the dark, and the cold.

I think I fell asleep—I must have, because I remember waking up, and the smell of burning lamps and burning grass was all around me, and there was a light, a light already fading into a memory of silver, and my ropes were untied, lying limp on the grass beside me. I sat up and rubbed my numb, rain-soaked ankles and legs until, painfully, they prickled into life again, and I was able to stand.

I did not make it to my feet.

A great wind blew through the little valley, and it knocked me to the earth again, a wind so stiff and quick that it slapped my eyes shut like snow-stuck windows, made them water behind the lids, whipped every drop of sweat from my skin until I was dry as a page. I could not open my eyes, I could not see, but hands seemed to clutch at me in the dark, tear at my clothes, carry me up into arms I could not begin to guess at. Dark moved through dark and time passed without speaking to me.

And, though a man would not sleep at such a time, I woke with a raw throat and another child's arm flopped over my face. It was thin and bony, all elbow. As I swam up into myself, I realized I was lying over another body, not less thin than the first. I looked up through a net of limbs, and beyond the limbs were thick bars of glass frosted over with ice. The wind had dwindled somewhat, much as a sirocco will dwindle into a sandstorm, but dwindle nonetheless. It curled and snapped through the cage and every angled limb.

As I struggled up through the mass, some sleeping children moaned and turned over, some wakened ones moved to the side—all were nearly naked, clothed in scraps which might once have been suits and dresses, and none reached up to draw a rag over their nakedness when my movement brushed the clothing aside. I reached the top of the pile of bodies—I thought there were about twenty of us there, shoved into the cage like stacked cow-ribs—and peered out into a world of wreckage.

Please be patient with me—I am trying to describe a place you will never see.

Wind-sprung tears streaked my face as I looked across a kind of central square. There were houses at its pale edges, fountains, even a bell tower, but I could see no wood or stone. Everything in the place was made of what the wind had managed to accumulate—paper and fish-bones and the bodies of unfortunate birds, scraps of fur and broken plaster and apple peels, lemon rinds, date seeds, old dresses, shoes without soles, soles without shoes, frayed rope and shattered pulleys. But most of the detritus of the city, most of the city of detritus, was paper. The fountains shot folios and scriptures and broadsheets into the air, and they were drafted by the gales into construction: endless pages sealed together as walls and stairs and peaked roofs by the unceasing wind. At the smallest break in the storm, I suspected, the whole place would drift into nothing.

The glass cage swung from an iron frame on a dais in the square. Canopies hung in patches over us, shredded cloth stretched through their frames, threads slipping almost to the ground. There were holes and rifts and cuts everywhere, but under their doubtful care, the wind behaved like a willful infant: cowed, but determined to get its own back the minute any back is turned. Folk moved over the rustling courtyard, poring over barrels and boxes

and trays—tottering creatures with slender, wispy arms and legs, necks like those of swans, curving up to heads high above their shoulders, and great, distended bellies, swollen as a mother's mound on a woman already full of too much meat and wine. Occasionally, one would peel a blown page from its spidery calves. The moon shone dully through the torn canopies like a bone through punctured skin.

We were ignored in our cage, shivering, clutching each other in a blind search for warmth, for hours. Sometime near dawn I grabbed at an arm for purchase and heard the smallest of cries—and I saw her, for the first time. A little older than I, but much thinner, thinner than a fawn at the bottom of winter's well, and she looked up at me with enormous black eyes, her dark hair cut roughly, like a penitent's, close to her head, in uneven patches and bald spots. Her lips were pale, cracked, as though she had not drunk water in days. Her tiny wrist twisted painfully in my hand. Her gaze slid to the wandering creatures in the square and back to me. I let her go as though she had burned me—and she had burned me, of course she had—those black, black eyes had burned me as surely as a brand. I held out my hand to pull her up out of the well of legs and arms, but she shook her head and cringed back into them. I rested my head against her gingerly; she coughed a little. These were the first times I touched her, and the first sounds I heard from her mouth.

Finally, the sun came gray and dingy through the high and wind-worried clouds, and one of the long-necked things came sidling up to the dais. In one quick motion it unlocked the door of the cage and stepped aside to avoid the pile of children that tumbled out. Soundlessly, it prodded us, squeezed us, and, with a strength I would not have suspected, pulled us apart, sorting us onto either side of the dais, where others of the city's folk guided us into two shivering lines. The creature's skin was pale and silvery, as though water moved just beneath the surface; its touch was cool and dry.

I was relieved that the girl was sorted into the same line as I, which was much shorter than the second. We stood side by side, she and I, waiting. The children opposite us were tied together, wrist by wrist, with a rope paler than skin. They looked at us helplessly, teeth chattering, toes blue. Then, their thin-armed guardian towed them over to our side and gave the lead to the last child in our line. It had to prod him roughly, and finally it just put the rope into his

hand and closed his fingers around it. The creature who had opened the cage then took the hand of the child at the front of the line and led us all away. By instinct we locked hands together, as if going to a picnic behind our mother's skirts. The girl squeezed my hand gently. We walked out of the courtyard and into the howl, through streets made of little more than rooster bones and petrified branches. It cracked under our feet, and the cracking was the only sound, until we stopped before a tall edifice with a solid, well-made door set into the rubbish-walls. It might have been a church, once, a basilica with tall towers. Now, like most of the architecture of the city, the factory—for that is what it was, I came to learn—was mostly paper. I could read many of the printed letters, but they folded into each other or thatched over each other to make an arcane gibberish:



HERE BEGINS THE BOOK OF CLOWN, BURGLAR, CRIMINAL PROSPERITY TO MARROW AND ALL HER MARKET CLOSED BY ORDER GOATFLESH—TWO PORTIONS FOR GOBLETS UNAVAILABLE IN BLUE, YELLOW, RED SILK MEASURED BY PROPRIETOR'S ARM NOT CUSTOMER'S WOLF SOUP HOT AND TASTY CARAT WEIGHT THUS WAS BURIED ONCE THERE WAS A CHILD, WHOSE FACE WARNING: SALE OF INFESTED WHEAT ALL WEALTH TO THE CHRYSOPRASE THIEVES WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT—

On and on it wound, around the lintel and over the walls like a frieze, parchment and vellum and plain paper and linen, white and gold and black and gray and even scarlet, bright green mold glinting at angles. The children passed through the door—and it seemed so strange to me then, that a real door should have been shoved into the pages here but nowhere else—first the unbound, then the bound. The silence pressed down like piled stones on our shoulders; it was too much to bear. Just as the last of the knotted ones passed over the threshold, I slipped my place in line, hauling the girl with me, and

dashed out, down the steps and onto the wind-racked street of bones and branches.

One of the creatures caught us easily—they are so fast on those thready legs, like terrible ostriches. In a gale-shaded alley it gripped me by the hair. It motioned back toward the factory and tried to guide us with its gaunt fingers. I stood my ground, and my friend moved closer to me.

"Where are we?" I hissed. But my hiss was like a shout in the hushed, empty alley. The thing looked startled.

"You are not supposed to talk to me," it said haltingly.

"We can't obey rules no one tells us about," I insisted.

"You know now. Go inside and don't make trouble."

"We shouldn't have to obey rules we haven't agreed to. You aren't our parents," the girl said, and thus I heard her voice for the first time. It was low and thick and firm as a forest floor.

"She's right," I said. "Tell us where we are. And what is that place where you sent the others?"

It stood, confused, looking from the door, where its companions had already disappeared with the last of the children, to us and back again. It rocked from one stiltlike leg to the other. "I'll be punished," it whined finally.

The girl rubbed her shaved skull. "Look," she said, "has any other child tried to talk to you?"

"Never."

"Then you can't really know you'll be punished. But you'll certainly be punished if I scream and he runs off. If you tell us these things, we will be good, and afterward we'll go where you want us to go." She looked at me, her dark eyes burning like blades. "We promise."

The thing took a deep breath and pulled its meager coat closer over its huge stomach. Its mouth was very wide, almost ear to ear, and strings of bluish hair tumbled down over its cheeks.

It cleared its long throat. "All… all right…"

THE FOREMAN'S TALE

IF IT PLEASES YOU TO KNOW IT, I AM VHUMMIM of Marrow, third daughter of Orris, who was the grand niece of the seventeenth Chrysoprase, which is how our rulers were titled in the days before the Wasting. From the degenerated wealth of that long-dead personage, Orris-My-Benefactor inherited an apple cart and a fetish stand. In my turn I took proprietorship of these things, and added to them a meat-pit. Among wealth I was not wealthy, but beyond the rolls of the Asaad, the Great Market, I would be envied for the gold at my throat and the silk at my feet. So were we all, envied and envying, in the glory of Marrow-That-Was.

When I was a child, the Asaad was the heart of my heart, and in this I was not unique. How high its canopies flew, how bright those draping oranges, those greens, those deep blues! Frankincense bubbled thick and brown in high-rimmed cauldrons, black-faced sheep babbled in their pens, gold was measured out into black purses great and small. How sweet was the sound of creaking cart wheels, the sound of bartering, the sound of coins solid in the palm! The blessed sky over the Asaad was always blue, the polished stones of the square ever shining. For my own part, I was eager to sell our apples, our little figurines, and so proud to acquire the flame-pit and roasting tongs, to add to my family's economy. All citizens took part in the Asaad, or one of the smaller satellite markets, if one could not afford the stall rent demanded in the city center. To shirk one's duty to economy was a crime punishable by scalding irons applied to the arches of the feet. So it was that each morning the entire

city—the city that mattered, anyway—crowded under canopies to play out the grand procession of commerce.



My apples were crisp between hundreds upon hundreds of teeth; my jade and onyx and garnet fetishes bought themselves thrice over in luck: bears and snakes and spiders and storks, elephants and crows, and an endless, grotesque variety of Stars. I oiled my hair, the pride of my beauty, with the most expensive attar of emerald—a very intricate process, to press oil from gems, but once, in this place, we knew how to do it. My scalp shone green and black. My neck was short, my thighs round. I was even a bit fat, not an easy thing to avoid in the Asaad, where any taste is answered by twelve more rarified. I preferred date-stuffed serpents with a drizzle of rose-glâce, in my day. The juice of pepper-crusted dormice and honey-mashed snail shell ground finer than diamond dust ran down my sisters' chins. Little songbirds basted in raspberry sugar and bees' wings made sticky my brothers' fingers. In the fruit-sellers' quarter, pomegranate skins were packed with the tiniest of edible rubies, so small they melted on the tongue like cubes of sugar. Even more complex is the process by which foodstuff is made from the raw material of wealth, but we had mastered this, too, in the days when we knew all things. Once I ate a topaz the size of my father's fist, and its skin split under my teeth like my own apples. The sun was so warm, that day, I thought it would shine through me. My father encouraged me gently, pushed the golden thing to my lips. It tasted of summer-baked wheat and the palest of peaches.

In the Asaad we ate everything we could buy and we could buy anything. Nothing did not answer our hunger, nothing did not have its price.

I first heard of it during the third luncheon shift—the whole market could not cease because we are inclined to be hungry in the middle of the day. We ate in shifts so that commerce never truly paused. That day I reclined on a red sofa

beneath a violet canopy spangled with silver crescents, drinking spiced chocolate in a cup of plain gold. I was young then; I could not have expected more. A rind of citrine floated in my drink, and I prodded it with one long, frost-painted fingernail as the quince-seller whispered:

"Have you heard? It's all the way up to the Rhukmini shops now."

A particularly corpulent merchant, who had a few years earlier developed an astonishing and popular hybrid of plum and amethyst, yawned and slapped iridescent blue flies from his own cup. "So? They'll block off the street and we'll go about our business. Rhukmini was a fishmongers' slum, anyway, you old melon-wort, a pale and piecemeal shadow of the Asaad—I call it a blessing. No more lifting one's pant leg to avoid the squid ink and ice-chunked cod blood."

The plum-breeder had taken to the latest fashion of grafting various extraneous limbs to his body—his face was gray, contorting slowly into a small elephant's trunk which sloped over his mustache. He was quite proud of the infant appendage, and made sure all in the Asaad knew it would surely grow much larger by the end of the season. He was a man of considerable size, after all.

"What's happened?" I asked, curious. I smoothed a shimmering strand of hair over my forehead—the heat pooled sweat and gem oil together, and a few green trickles warmed my neck. The quince cart-woman turned to me, her nose rings glittering.

"It's gone," she said triumphantly. "The entire Rhukmini." Second only to our goods is our command of gossip—and she had the upper hand in this other economy. Her short hair was slicked in garnet, and she never sweat.

"Gone?" I was never a conversationalist.

"Well," the plum-breeder cut in, stroking his lazuli-coated mustache with his thumb and his fledgling trunk with his forefinger, "not entirely. There's bits of it left, blowing around. But I daresay no one will be bashing out octopus skulls there anytime soon."

I must have gaped—who would not have gaped? My agate-tattooed teeth (but one art in a city which contained all possible arts) showed behind my thick painted lips. I could see the plum-breeder nakedly calculate whether my teeth trumped his trunk in the hierarchy of opulence, which shifted and slid

with each new process, alchemy, or mechanick the Asaad supplied. He seemed to decide his little gray appendage was safely superior.

"Why don't you go down Rhuk-side and see for yourself? I'll have my boys watch your cart; they're as honest as a skulk of foxes, which is to say not particularly, but they sell as well as they steal, and what more can anyone ask of the young?"

I frowned. True, they would steal, but his sons had quick tongues and I was young enough to be curious about the city beyond the canopies, young enough to think the stinking alley full of empty crab claws and squabbling gulls flapping in off the river might be worth the loss of a few apples and knuckles of meat.

I went—who would not have gone?

In the Garden

THE BOY SHIVERED.

"I don't like this story," he whispered. A low wind blew through the Garden, throwing old flowers up into dervishes and clattering one branch against another. "I liked the pirates better."

The girl shrugged. "I cannot change what is written on my skin, any more than I can change my skin itself."

The evening was now full of mist and blue, rolling through the Garden paths like a regiment clothed in starlight. The girl picked at the deep moss and looked toward the Palace, which was as full of light as ever, light and voices. Her fingertips were colorless. She spoke as if from a long way off, and hidden behind a wall of marble and glass.

"If I had not these marks on me, if I were not a raccoon-demon scampering over a Garden rich in scraps, I might have been called Dinarzad, and had pearls strung onto my hair, and married a man who owned golden roosters. It is very strange to think about."

The boy furrowed his clear brow.

"I do not think you would like the man with the roosters."

The girl grinned like a hare who knows it has escaped. "I am not a fool. Most of the time, I am glad not to be called Dinarzad. But the cold is sometimes like dying, and then I think it would not be so bad."

The boy started as though he were a young cat seizing upon a mouse for the first time. "What *is* your name, my friend? I am ashamed I did not ask it

before!"

The girl looked down toward the moss and her freezing hand on it like a blight. She made her face very still, still as water, still as stars, so that he would not see her bitterness, hard as hawthorn bark. "How should I know my name? Who was there to call me so, to call me anything but demon, urchin, raccoon? If I have a name I do not own it—someone else must have it folded away in some strange purse, and my eyes will never see it."

Chagrined, the boy followed her gaze to the Palace and they sat in silence for a time. It did not seem right for him to offer his own name when she had nothing to give him in return. He did not want to show her once more all the things he possessed that she did not.



The first dead leaves left their trees and floated down, their stems noiseless against the wet stones. Somewhere behind her, the girl could hear the slow rippling of the pond where the boy had caught her bathing, had caught her under the moon. There were low, wild roses around their cairn of rocks, but they had lost their color to rain and wind, and lay ruined at the children's feet like torn pages.

"If you want me to stop—"

"No!" the boy said quickly, his dark eyes wide. "I do not like it, but I could not bear it if I did not hear it out. Tell me about that awful place."

The girl moved her hand over her eyes, touching that black, soft place where all these things had long ago been written. Not for the first time, she thought she could feel the shape of the letters burning into her. At length she began again, her voice echoing on the green rocks like water splashed into an empty well.

“Vhummim the gem-eater went into the old fishmarket, and the smell there was of old scallops and shattered shells…”

THE FOREMAN'S TALE, CONTINUED

THE RHUKMINI HAD BEEN BEAUTIFUL IN ITS way—the sound of silver crab mallets thudding against claws and green clacking of lobsters muffled by their diamond tanks. There had been awnings of narwhal skin, blue as new ink, and carts with wheels of baleen. There had been a little alcove where the curious might sample seawater from every ocean in the world, just to know how the taste of salt differed from surf to surf.

It was gone—not gone, *wasted*.

A terrible wind blew through the long alley which had once been the Rhukmini market, and on it was some memory of the smell of ice floating in fish blood—but truly it smelled of dust, nothing more than dust. The rest was simply ruin, pieces of shell and paper and meat and wire and skin, as if the whole place had been torn into shreds by the hand of some vengeful giant. The wind kept what remained in the rough shape of the old alley, whipping whitefish against one wall and wrapping papers against another.

It was not unlike what you see of Marrow all around you—save that this was new and raw, wet and weeping wound-bright on that old arm of the city. All the colors were still vivid, and I could see smears here and there which might have been cuttlefish or salmon, which might too have been a shopkeeper or a customer in search of malachite roe.

Perhaps I should not have looked closer than this. The alley was clearly marked and blockaded with bleached-pine boards; it was a logical response. A limb has rotted? Cut it off, provide a tourniquet for the tattered stump, and go

about the business of living. But I was curious—who among us was not curious? Thus I climbed between the boards and onto the shredded, ruined thoroughfare of the Rhukmini—and fell at once through the striations of refuse and fish skeletons and paper, endless paper, into darkness deep and hard as a closed fist.

Beneath the city, light fell in broken tufts where parts of streets and squares had gone the way of the Rhukmini. It was not as far to fall as you might think. Even so, I could not reach the first fluttering gray pieces of market to pull myself up again. Instead, I wandered—and who could have done otherwise? It was not so far to fall, but it was very far to wander. I could smell my own sweat mingling with the emerald oil of my hair—did you know that emeralds smell of limes and frankincense? They do, they do—I remember it so well, how I loved that smell, the smell of myself adorned.

It was great and black and hollow, the underside of the city. The air was warm, almost hot, and moved languorously around my ankles. Stone pillars snaked and coiled into a sodden bed of dirt—when I think on it now I think they must have been the roots of Marrow, the granite and marble roots of banks and towers and universities, the piled stone roots of tenements, of factories, the golden roots of jewelers' palaces. Each edifice sent down its strange and secret toes into the undersoil, and I wandered through a forest of stone. Despite myself I began to search through the mere for the roots of the Asaad—how much more beautiful, how much richer and brighter, the stone of those roots must be than all these others! It was this thought that kept me from fear in those low, hidden paths, strung with spiders and mold. I would find the Asaad again, and surely it would lift its child up.

But I did not find the tangling roots of the Asaad. I came, after passing through some few threshings of light that sputtered sickly through to the depths of the root-city, to a great snarl of cedar—real wood, amid all that endless stone. The ground was closed tight around the massive red curls, so that I could not see what sent down such tendrils into the dark. And from behind those gnarling crags, I heard a gnashing, a grinding, a crunching, gnawing sound which I shall not forget, for all of my days.

I went toward it. Who would not have gone toward it?

At first I saw nothing in the dusky shadows, the sharp smell of cedar filling my nose like water. Then it was a gleam of white—behind the roots, further back and farther in, a gleam of white flashing in the gloam.

"Is there someone there? My name is Vhummim, daughter of Orris—I have become lost!" I called. My voice was weak and quavering. Whose could have been stronger, more sure?

My answer was a louder gnashing, a louder grinding, like a whetstone spinning.

"Do you know the way out?" I whispered.

"I am the way out," a low, humming voice whispered back to me. "Through me you can find the light again."



It crawled close to me, on its belly like a cringing dog, and peered up into my eyes, a creature made entirely of teeth. Its four legs were a jumble of molars, bicuspids, incisors. Its eyes flashed: wolfs' teeth yellow with age. Great flat elephants' teeth made up its spine, and long tigers' canines curved into ribs. Its feet were hooves of enamel; its jaw hung hungrily open, white and yellow. Its delicate face: row after row of infant teeth, pearly and pale. There was nothing of it that was not teeth—what I could see between the gnashing molars was empty space. I was afraid then, of course. Who would not have been afraid?

"Who are you?"

It sidestepped, back, forth. The molars of its feet left tracks in the warm, wet soil. "I am Golod, He Who Swallows."

"Will you show me the way out, Golod?"

"You are pretty, and your smell is pleasing." His sharp eyes ground against his enameled eye sockets. "I came to this place to find pretty and pleasing things…"

THE TALE OF THE HUNGRY LORD

DID YOU KNOW THAT A CITY CAN DIE AS EASILY as a person? It is true, I promise you. It dies in the same sad, lonely ways that people do: a knife in the governor's heart, a quick poisoning of rivers. And there are cancers that begin slowly, a pinprick in a bookseller's shop in a dust-clouded alley, a lump in a rainspout splashed with yellow leaves. Who would ever notice such a little thing tucked away like that, in a city of pillars and plums and plumes? Or it can become food, as all things inevitably are. It can be devoured, torn limb from street—it can be swallowed. By larger cities, by armies, by citizens too hungry for the meager meat of lamps and botanical gardens and commemorative war statues.

Or by something which has come to like its taste.

I suppose you could call me a cancer, a tumor tucked into the storm gutter, but it would be more apt to call me a creature of appetite.

Would you like to hear about my family? Every time I have come across one of you gem-gobbling peacocks, you immediately tell me who your mother is, or who your father is, or who your great-uncle on the distaff side is. I should offer no less—I had no mother, I had no father. Is not my pedigree immaculate?

There was a man, once, in a wood far from here. This man suffered a great hunger, suffered it the way some men suffer a wasting illness or an arrow in

the foot. He was a man of some property, and before he was struck by his hunger, he was not unhandsome, and married well. His wife was lovelier than a year of Aprils, black of hair and eye. He was called Maciej; she was called Malgorzata.

Because of the fortunate match of Malgorzata, Maciej found himself in possession of a goodly number of tenant farmers, which for a time he treated as well as any lord may—which is to say, with neglect at all times save harvest, for at harvest all lords exhibit hunger beside which Maciej's would seem but moderate and mild. But it came to pass that for three harvests the land was cruel and hard, and yielded up barely enough to feed all that tilled it, and the house on the hill had to satisfy itself with selling tapestries and suchlike in order to provide apples and pig flesh and cabbages.

In the fourth winter, there was no crop at all. Wind howled across the fields, bare and bristling as a new monk's head. Maciej and his fair wife stared at an empty table, and so too did all of those who worked that land. It was difficult, as such times are. The last dairy cows had been slaughtered; the last egg chickens had been slurped to the bone. I would not like to tell you what the most wretched of them did to survive.

In the depths of this winter Maciej conceived a great hunger in him, conceived it the way some women will conceive a child. His belly snarled and lurched; he was blind with it, clutching at the very drapes to fill the hole in him. But fortune sometimes smiles on the suffering, and it was a rich, green spring, full of new lambs and new fields planted with seed and breeding pairs brought by sympathetic relatives of Malgorzata, who sent wagons from over the hills. Speechless with relief, Maciej ate, and ate. He paced his halls, his stomach gnawing caverns into itself, devouring apples and pig flesh and cabbages as quickly as he could—but there was no surcease for the unlucky lord! Yet he did not grow fat, for as quickly as he ate he was hungry again, his body burning so hot and bright that at night, the farmers needed no candles: the house on the hill was incandescent with the starving lord.

Finally, when harvest came again and with it the lord's due, Malgorzata thought her husband would be sated. Into his mouth went cider and beer, hazelnuts and venison, apples and currants and sheep shanks. Into his belly went squash and pies and hollering chickens; into his gullet went beef

knuckles and mushrooms and pigs by the wagon. When there was nothing left for the farmers to give over to the house on the hill before they starved themselves, fair Malgorzata, black of hair and eye, went to them and begged them to give over their animals to her husband's hunger, which was now so great that mere vegetables and fruits could not touch it. All would be repaid, she promised—had her kin not supplied the spring when the winter was at its worst? They could survive winter; they knew this now.



At first, they surrendered ox and chicken, goat and goose, even horse and dog. All these Maciej ate at his groaning table, to bone and hoof—all save the teeth, which even he could not stomach. These teeth he tossed into a corner of his hall when he had sucked the marrow from their owners, and as the days wore on, the pile grew. His endless feast held no joy for him now: His belly burned and he could not slake it, could not even move from his creaking table. He wept as he ate, for he could not stop, and he hated the taste of gristle and bone—but he could not stop.

Before long their holdings were empty of snorting and bleating. Malgorzata sent to her distant kin for ever larger and more exotic creatures: elephants and tigers and wolves disappeared into the house on the hill, which lit the nights for miles as Maciej sat at his board, eating and weeping, eating and weeping. His jaw crushed leopard and lion, griffin and even the odd unicorn. He did not notice their taste, but he ate them all the same, and the house on the hill blazed.



But even this plenty could not last and the kin of Malgorzata refused to send more. There was nothing further to take from their holdings, and even the draperies had been stripped to feed the unfortunate lord. He had begun to gnaw at the cornices and baseboards, his tears falling from the cairn of teeth as he climbed atop it, trying to suckle at the reliefs of blossoming grapes that adorned the ceiling.

Softly, as was her way, Malgorzata drew him down and sat him at the table which had become the rack on which his bones cried out. He looked up at her with hunger-haggard eyes, red as plague and twice as hollow. He looked at her, ashamed, with hunger.

"It is all right, husband. I have known this day would come."

She laid her hands on the table, smooth and tanned with her days beating blankets in the sun and begging livestock from threshold to threshold. She spread her fingers against the juice-stained grain of the wood.

"A woman may give her flesh as she pleases, and a lady owes no less than her people give. The lord takes equally, all from all. Take only my hands, and swear to me you will replace them."

At first he would not, feigned horror at the very suggestion—but there were her hands, fingers splayed wide and firm on the table, and his mouth watered for her. She did not say a word, but also, she did not withdraw her hands. After a time, he brought out his carving knife, and, weeping all the while, severed his wife's brown hands at the wrist.

Malgorzata did not weep.

He would not eat before his wife's gaze, and crouched in the corner below the mountain of teeth like a whipped dog, sucking flesh from bone. When he was finished, he placed the chewed bones most tenderly in a reliquary of copper and opal, fingers delicately folded on a green cushion.

And for a while, the lord was sated. He was true, too, to his word, and made for his wife new and strange hands—for Maciej was a clever man before his hunger devoured him. He wove together hands of wicker, of hazel and red osier, green and pliant willow. He lashed them to her bruised stumps with leather and bolted the branches to her belt with fine, thin chain that looped and whorled through her skirts, so that she could move her arms as widely as before. To be sure, she moved oddly, her long wicker fingers clattering against dish and cheek, but she was much as she had been, and the house on the hill was quiet and dim at last.

But the time came again when Maciej was consumed. He hid it as long as he was able, but finally collapsed before his lady, the terrible light boiling all through him as he hungered. Fair Malgorzata, black of hair and eye, raised him up and said to him:

“It is better that I lose a limb than that the countryside lose all once more. Take only my feet, and swear to me you will replace them.”

This time he did not argue, but brought out his carving knife immediately, nocked and pitted as it was from the joints of so many creatures, and severed his wife’s feet at the ankle. As before, he would not eat before her gaze, but crouched in the corner before the mountain of teeth, sucking flesh from bone. When he was finished, he placed the chewed bones most tenderly in a reliquary of silver and malachite, toes delicately folded on a blue cushion.

And for a while, the lord was sated. He was true, too, to his word, and made for his wife new and strange feet—for Maciej was a resourceful man before his hunger devoured him. He wove together feet of wicker, of hazel and red osier, green and pliant willow. He lashed them to her bruised stumps with leather and bolted the branches to her belt with fine, thin chain that looped and whorled through her skirts, so that she could move her legs as widely as before. To be sure, she moved oddly, her long wicker toes clattering against floor and bedpost, but she was much as she had been, and the house on the hill was quiet and dim again.

But the time came again when the lord hungered. And again, fair Malgorzata, black of hair and eye, looked out onto the green fields and covered her face with her wicker hands, saying that it was better that she lose another limb than for the countryside to lose all once more. And she gave over her knees, her calves, her hips, her rib cage, her shoulders. Maciej fed and glowed and wept and fed again, and all the while Malgorzata’s body became a strange skeleton of branches, her chest a hollow cage, her back a ladder of wood. Behind these bars still beat her red, hot heart, and still she had her jaw and some part of her fair face—and both black eyes—though she had given over her left cheek to her husband’s need.

Finally, when Maciej starved once more, these things were all that were left, and Malgorzata walked her halls in a body of willow and hazel. He told himself he would not ask such a thing, that the rights of a lord have limits, that she had given more than any man could ask of his wife. But still, the hunger roiled in him, and after so much time the hunger burned for nothing but her. It was the dark of winter, and fair Malgorzata, who had nothing left of her black hair but a stiff fall of twigs, laid herself upon the old table and said:



“It is better that I lose these last than that I live to see my lord ravage his lands yet again. Take my heart and my face which once was fair, but swear to me you will replace them.”

Weeping bitterly, his hunger naked on his face, Maciej brought out his carving knife, darkened as its blade was from so much woman’s blood, and cut out his wife’s heart, and jaw, and fair black eyes. There was no gaze to meet, and he devoured his feast before her wicker frame. When he was finished, he placed the chewed bones most tenderly in a reliquary of gold and garnet, her jaw lying heavy on a red cushion.

And he made for her a wicker heart, and placed it behind her hazel-ribs.

And he made for her a wicker face, and fixed it to her willow-skull.

And he made for her wicker eyes, and set them into her branch-brow.

But her teeth he did not close into the reliquary. He climbed the mountain of teeth and laid them down at its peak, which was by now very near the ceiling.





The lord was sated, and I awoke.

The white bundle of Malgorzata's teeth descended to my heart, and out of the tooth cairn I stumbled, raw and uncertain as a newborn. Maciej stared as I took my first steps, hooves of tooth clicking on the tiled floor. I wobbled, my vision blurred—I saw him clearly, and the wicker body behind him.

I saw him, and I hungered.

THE FOREMAN'S TALE, CONTINUED

"I SWALLOWED HIM UP, BONE AND TOOTH. I WAS still hungry, and I turned to the wicker-wight which was once Malgorzata, and we looked at each other, twig-eye to tooth-eye. But I would not devour her. She was my sister, we two things hollowed out by hunger. Instead I leapt from the house on the hill which was now dark, dark as rock over stone, and I took the hunger with me. It is all I am. I am all it is.

"The hunger and I looked for things big enough to feed us. We began with cattle and peasants, but these were not enough. We tried forests but they were bitter, marshes but they were brackish. Finally, we came here."

I quavered, my flesh wet with gem and sweat. "Are you punishing us?" I whispered. "Because we are hungry, too? Because we eat strange things and are never sated?"

The tooth-wight snorted, a peculiar, rattling sound. His movements were like a housecat's, scratching at the soil, opening and closing his tusk-claws, tossing his molar-tail into the air. "Of course not. Does a farmer punish a cow? No, he eats it right up and licks his chops. You are pretty, and pleasing, and we suspect this place is big enough to feed us. We will pass you through us, and revel in your taste. I am no different from any other thing: I want to eat; I want to live."

Golod turned and fixed his oversized jaw on one of the long cedar roots. He ground at it and suckled at it and worried it like a bone—and slowly, the root turned ashen and peeled away from itself in shingles, wisping away to broken

shards and pale strips of bark. It kept its shape—and I might have imagined it, I do not say that I do not imagine things, and who would not imagine things in a place so dark and terrible?—but it seemed to me a winding wind fluttered through the ruined root.

"That is not eating," I said softly. "That is wasting, that is ruining, but it is not eating."

Golod leered at me, his wolf teeth gleaming in their sockets. "Do you not also leave waste behind when you consume a thing? It is not my fault that mine is more interesting than yours."

We looked at each other. I knew then that he would swallow me up, and running was impossible—surely he knew these tunnels better than I, he who had chewed them into the lightless guts of the city. I was frozen—who would not have been frozen, about to be eaten like a ripe jewel? Cold emerald slipped down the nape of my neck. I thought of my cart, all my apples, and my little agate god statues, and my new golden spit which turned so quietly and smoothly in the hand. I thought of the topaz of so many years past, and how its juice had trickled down my throat.

"I wonder what you will look like," he said, "when you have passed through me?"

THE TALE OF THE TWELVE COINS, CONTINUED

"I PASSED THROUGH. IT WAS NOT LIKE BEING eaten, more like being worried—*wasted*." Vhummim looked at us miserably, her eyes huge and milky in her round, floating face. She stroked her sinuous neck with bony fingers. "Golod put his teeth to me and my skin turned to pages and ash, held together by old, dust-clung air. Down there among the roots of bank and basilica, I became other than myself. My neck grew so long I could not eat, my limbs so long I could not run. Death translates us into what it will—we are the Pra-Ita, those who have passed through."

I stared at her, her withered, stretched throat, so thin I could almost see through to the wasted edifice behind her. Curling, grasping wind threaded the streets. She pulled her robes aside, gauzy and wispy as dandelion silk, and showed her belly, swollen as a woman long gone with child. But instead of flesh there was a jewel, a great colorless, faceted thing set into her flesh as though she were no more than a ring.

"I speak the tongues of death," she whispered, her voice mingling with the wind. "I am translated, and I do not know myself, save that I have become what I have eaten, and it has become me. Thus went the rest of the city, slowly, the way of the Rhukmini, the way of Vhummim. The Varil's green and blooming docks sank into a river of detritus; the war memorials sighed into crumbling. Finally the Asaad, too, lost all its scarlet and gold, and became nothing but its own shell, money and paper and stiff, dead silk blown together by that endless wind. It happened so gradually that we did not really notice, until we had all

passed through, and still we spent our money, still we traded our wasted goods. It is a habit, a compulsion, and it does not need translation. The wind, that relentless, thrashing wind that Golod brought, blows us from place to place, now. The wind keeps us together as long as it can, and then we are gone, gone until there is another valley or cliffside to sigh against, and then it breathes us into our old shape again. This is where we have come, now. It is like any other place to us."

"And the place you wish us to go, with all the strange words on the lintel?" the shorn girl asked.

Vhummim blinked slowly, as though it should be obvious. "It is the Mint. You will work, like the other children. The living work; the dead do not. Be happy that you were chosen for work. It is better for you this way." She closed her dress and fidgeted with the ragged cloth, looking up at us from behind her lanky hair. "If you do not go now, they will miss you at the counting, and it will be bad for you."

"We could just run, you know," I quavered, trying not to think of that flat, heavy door and what it would sound like when it swung shut.

"Please believe I would catch you," said Vhummim solemnly. Her leg cocked up like a stork's, a promise of speed our little legs could not hope for.

We followed her. Who would not have followed?

The door swung shut. It sounded like bones breaking.

THE TALE OF THE CROSSING, CONTINUED

IDYLL COUGHED IN THE DAMP AIR, HIS BREATH ricocheting in his lungs like a loose arrow. His fingernails, long as a wealthy woman's, dug into the ash-wood pole as he dragged it forward. A tiny whirlpool formed around its pale shaft as he drew it up—unseen mud clasping, dragging down.

"I would like to disbelieve you, but this is not a place where many men hazard lies. You were in the Mourned City—I envy you. I was there when there were neither ashes nor pages nor fish skeletons piled up into minarets. Are there roses there, still? Have they all gone white and brown, drifting along the dead dockside?"

Seven frowned and shoved his dark hair back from a wan face. Around his bruised eyes were already lines and cracks that would one day be wrinkles, chasms, trenches in flesh. He spoke softly.

"Some days, in the Mint, they blew through the door like snow."

Idyll nodded. In the farthest distance, behind the mist, Seven thought he could make out the spiky, scattered tips of bare trees, cat scratches in a gray sky, and a lonely beachhead. It was still so far off he could scarcely call the water a lake. It seemed to him a vast inland sea, and he trembled without wishing to. The ferryman rubbed at his knee with a hooked and gloved hand that seemed to have far too many knuckles.

"I can feel the storm in my joints now, a soreness like longing. I'll try to get you across before it comes through, but I can't promise."

"What sort of storm? How can there be storms here?"

"The sort that little coat won't begin to hold back. And if you knew much of the local geography, you would have brought better and thicker, and a tongue less eager for questions."

Seven sank back against the ruined mast and drew his knees up to his chest. He rubbed his chin against them and the leaf-stiffened wind reddened his nose.

"*She*'s there," he mumbled.

"She?"

"My friend. She's there, in the empty forest, where all those trees are cracking in the wind. She's there, all wrapped in rags. She must be so cold. I can't leave her."

Idyll shook his great head and tugged his cloak tighter around his massive frame.

"Oh, son. I'm sorry. What a lot you have paid me for nothing."

The young man dug his fingernails into his palms and coughed into his sleeve, the nettle-sharp wind tearing his breath into scraps.

"You don't understand. You couldn't possibly understand us—we always save each other…"

THE TALE OF THE TWELVE COINS, CONTINUED

We were counted just inside the great hall, before our ears could adjust to silence and our eyes could adjust to darkness. The Pra-Ita were all around, their huge heads bobbing silently as crows pecking at grass. My head throbbed with the sudden cease of the wind. The bald girl stood just behind me in the long, gray line and clutched my hand.

"My name is Oubliette," she whispered, and she whispered it like a blessing, as though her name could hold me close and comfort me. I squeezed her cold fingers.

The numbers spilled out of the Pra-Itas' mouths like water unwanted, and we were led, child by child, to the center of the room, our little hands placed on smooth bars and handles we could not quite see in the dim light, things which seemed like soft-toothed gears, things which seemed like trays, things which seemed like long tables. Beneath our fingers, we began to understand, lay a machine, and as our eyes softened to the shadows, we saw it whole for the first time.

In the middle of a peeling gray floor stood a peeling gray frame. It hunched like a broken turtle, a high, arcing shell through which nameless things passed, lumpish gray heaps disappearing, passed solemnly as relics between children no older than we, and tipped into the rusting, ash-ridden structure. Smokestacks tottered high into the vaulted ceiling and spat pale fumes into the air in weak, spiraling puffs. Pistons drove into the depths of the machine and emerged again, dark and wet. A terrible crunching, stamping sound filled the

room, and at the far end of the shell, the contraption contorted into a twisted, enameled mouth, built in the image of a thing which had once walked, a thing made entirely of teeth.

Out of this mouth ran a long board, and onto it slowly spat coin after coin, dull and yellowish white, clunking dully onto the black wood.



Perhaps once, in the long past of Marrow, when they knew all possible things, the machine, the Mint, had moved of its own accord, but now small hands pressed and pulled and shoved at its every corner, turned its every gear, drew up its every dowel and thrust it down again. Furtive dark eyes gleamed around the shell and init, dozens of children adding their limbs to the apparatus so that it could move, so that it could press out coins at a stuttering, halting pace. Thin hands sat on our shoulders like owls' feet, and thin fingers curled around our chins, holding our faces fast toward the creaking thing.

"The living work," came a whisper which seemed to be Vhummim, her breathy, weary sighing—but who could be sure among all those long, stretching throats?

Satisfied that we saw the machine and knew that we would soon be among those dark eyes and pale hands, we were led, all in a line, the newest children of the Mint, to a long narrow room, barely held together by the clawing wind whistling through page-turned rafters. All along the walls lay little beds, turned down neatly, their coverlets thin as a cough and fluttering lightly as the gales rushed by outside. The Pra-Ita urged us all toward them, and like good boys and girls we each filed in, found a bed, and curled away from the door, the machine, the terrible long-necked creatures. On each pillow was a sliver of glassy stuff—I licked it under my blanket, then pushed it eagerly into my mouth. It was candy: something like raspberries, something like black tea, something like sugared bread crusts. I savored it, its juice running down my throat. Then I remembered Vhummim, and her city before it was my city. I

spat it out into my hand and stared in the gray half-light. It gleamed and shimmered, scarlet, pink, rose.

They had given us rubies. Shaved and slivered down enough to feed a dozen children. I looked over my shoulder at the Pra-Ita clustered near the door, watching us suckle the gems in our hungry mouths. They moaned quietly, miserably, watching us eat. I was too hungry to refuse to give them what they wanted: I pushed the cherry-colored stone back onto my tongue. It sat there like a scald of light. I shuddered and turned away again until I heard the door shut like hands clasping each other in prayer.

We were alone. In the morning, I was sure, our shifts would begin. When the darkness came wheedling through the shivering ceiling, I crawled out of my bed and found among the dark little heads one which was bristled and shorn: my friend, my Oubliette. She opened the corner of her pitiful blanket to me, and I climbed in beside her. We clutched desperately at each other, each trying to steal the other's warmth—there was little enough to steal, and finally we simply lay in each other's arms, trying very hard not to be terrified.

"Did you see what went into the machine?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Did you see what came out?"

She nodded.

The room was filled with the sleeping and soft weeping of other children, mewling like lost pigeons. I didn't know what else to say. She didn't cry, like the others, she just stared, and everywhere she stared seemed to shiver under her gaze.

"What happened to your hair?" I said finally, quiet as a thief with his hand on a coffer.

As if in answer, she took my hand in hers, both of us cold to purpled fingers, and drew it around her waist to rest against her shoulder blades. What I touched was not flesh, not flesh, but bark, and wood, and hard, twining vines with berries like knuckles. She was a child in my arms, yes, the front of her skinny and hard-used but still pretty and certainly a girl—but her back from neck to ankle was a gnarled and hollow tree, half dead, petrified into gray and sallow stone. The only warm and living thing I felt with my arms meeting

around her was a thick, long tail, a heifer's dun tail, ending in a soft tuft of fur. She would not look at me.

"Now you see what I am. I am wicked, and ugly, and that is why the hungry ghosts took me…"

THE HULDRA'S TALE

My mother used to sit me on her lap and tell me where we came from—so many times that I can not now forget even a word of the tale.

It is said that once there was a heifer so lovely that her skin was as red and flowing gold, her eyes as polished wood, her swishing, flicking tail brighter than a whip of fire. This cow was not quite a cow, as all beautiful things are both more and less than their bodies. In the folds of bark which enclose us all it is written that once she was a girl, nothing but a girl, with hair so long and shining that it caught the eye of Aukon, the Bull-Star, who put his white-hot hooves to her form and shaped her into his own image so that he could love her as he wished to.

Perhaps this is true, perhaps it is not. But as lovers sometimes do, once he had finished with her he wished to keep her all for his own, and the poor thing was left a heifer lowing at the sky—though she was the loveliest of all heifers who ever ate grass and drank water, it was not much consolation, I am sure.

"Where will I go? What shall I do?" the heifer cried.

And answers came, though not those she would have wished for. For though she knew it not, Aukai, the Heifer-Star, the Milk-Star with her black eyes, had seen what her brother had done, and set upon him. A terrible struggle occurred between the two huge creatures. If you have seen bulls battle over a mate, it was nothing to this. Aukai burned brighter than temple fires in her fury, and finally pinned Aukon against a hillock and chewed from him, with her wide, flat teeth, the flesh which made him a bull, leaving a lonely and

broken ox lowing weakly in the night, light leeching from him into the mud churned up by their grappling. In disgust, Aukai spit her brother's silver-dripping testicles away in a broad field, and thought no more of it. It is said that ever after maddened monks castrated themselves in her honor, doing penance in place of her heavenly brother. Perhaps this is true, perhaps not.

Yet a Star is a strange thing, and its ways are stranger still. In the place where the ruined flesh had fallen, a great almond tree grew, with broad white flowers and green fruits. And it came to pass that the cow who was once a girl wandered by the great tree in the height of its flowering. And the tree, too, being only somewhat less than Aukon himself, looked on her and loved her still. With whipping branches he dragged her, hoarsely braying, into his hollows and his crooks, and there stroked her skin with pale and papery twigs until, after many months, her wide flat teeth, not sharp, but sure, chewed their way free of him.

Perhaps this is true, perhaps it is not. Love rarely waits for permission. She ran far from the howling tree, who reached for her with long, snapping vines and needles—and in her running she gave birth to the first of us who are called huldra, who are girl and cow and tree jumbled together by some inattentive hand. The heifer looked on her first daughter with horror—how far she had come from the girl she was! But who would love this terrible child if she did not? Already her udder swelled and stretched. The wretched infant clutched at her mother's stiff golden hair, and the heifer sank to the earth to nurse. As the years went by she dropped children like pinecones from her flesh, and occasionally birthed one in the usual way of cows—poor creature, who bled children everywhere she went, and each one mongreled and mottled as we all are.

"My poor girls, my pitied boys," she said when we sat around her like a herd, flicking our tails at flies like buzzing sapphires, "I know in my heart that it will be for you as it was for me, and you will be loved always, yet only by those who do not share your shape, and care nothing for your say-so. I have given you nothing but sorrow and a dun tail."

Perhaps this is true, perhaps it is not. Perversions are often written over with elaborate stories, and who knows what strange nights' revels ended in the

huldra, who are tree and human and cow all together? I would not have liked to have been there.

But the story is not wrong about us.



I once had a golden ball, you see. Am I telling this tale poorly? Would a grown woman tell it better? My mother knew how to tell a tale properly. Perhaps she would have mentioned the ball in the beginning. Perhaps she would not have shown her tail so soon. Perhaps a good child would not admit that she owned such a thing as a golden ball—it has never done a girl any good to have one, in all the history of the world. But I am not a grown woman, and I loved my ball.

My sister was not given one, nor my cousins. What you must understand about a golden ball is that by giving one over into eager hands, parents acknowledge a certain wickedness in their children that must be occupied by something other than flesh or sweets. A mother does not give such a gift to the daughter she bathes in milk and perfumes in asters and daisies. She gives it to the scraggle-haired, mud-kneed child who plays by herself at the side of the old well. It will keep her from young men and candies that glitter like fluttering eyelashes, and if she or it or both together should tip over the side of the well, as has been known to happen from time to time, well, at least no daisy was wasted on her.

I once had a golden ball, you see.

One day, when I was turned barkwise to the sun, the miller's boy came up to our ash-wood fence. He said the things you might expect a miller's boy to say: He had never seen a girl with roots in her knee-pits before, I was pretty as a cherry without a pit, and wouldn't I come just a little closer? I shrugged. I was heifer-strong; there was nothing he could do to me. I came close up to the bars of the fence, and he said my eyes were the darkest he'd seen—then he kissed

me quick on the mouth. He stole my first kiss, did just as folk have always done when a huldra is in sight: take her without permission, without a care. It is because of this sort of thing that we were solitary creatures, living in our high-up huts, cradled in oak branches, so that the tree in us may rest, and speak rarely to those who are the same whether their back is turned or no.

I bolted for home, but as I ran I thought of little but the kiss. His lips tasted like flour and honey just scooped from the hive, and I told my mother so when I scrambled up the ladder of rope and found her ladling out grass soup for my supper. The next morning, she gave me the golden ball, and told me to run along and play. I stared at her, stricken. No word passed between us, though she had the grace not to hold my gaze. Her tail swished nervously behind her, dark brown across our branch-lashed floor. I took my ball quietly and went out into the fields, to play.

It was a little sun I kept close to my chest, so that it warmed next to my skin. I wrapped my long black hair around it and unwound it again. I called it little names which seem silly now. I polished it over and over with the tuft of my tail and kept it near me while I slept. It gleamed against my cheek like a slap. And I tossed it into the air by the old, vine-strangled well, smeared with flowers which once were red, sitting among the tall, seed-topped grasses like a huge, embittered toadstool. I could smell water in the old thing, algae-jeweled and wriggling with tadpoles, but I could not see it. Up and down I tossed my ball—it caught the light, burned it, scalded it, and my eyes were filled with tears as I stared into that little round star. I was never alone: It rolled and lay still and sparkled as well as a friend.

The day then came when the summer sun itself was a golden ball, and I lay like a dandelion in the grass, and slept with its hot palms on my face. Did I dream? I don't remember. But when I woke my ball was gone, and in its place was a little red-eyed creature who came nearly, but not quite, to my knees, staring and stroking my hair. It was a hedgehog, quite respectably large and furry, golden from hunch to nose—his quills jangled and clinked when he moved, a little glistening sound. He wrung his burnished hands and stroked his golden whiskers, and his eyes—were they garnets? Were they not?—glowered under lashes like wedding bands.



"Good afternoon," I said, after a long while. Perhaps I should have said something prettier. A grown woman might have known what to say.

The hedgehog bowed. I think if he had had a hat, he would have removed it.

"Good afternoon," he replied, in a high, rough voice like that of a flute scoured with river mud. "I have been watching you sleep. You do it very well."

I laughed. "My mother always hoped I would show a talent for something. Perhaps I shall become a sleeper by trade."

The hedgehog did not laugh. "My name is Ciriaco," he said, as if his name could hold my hand and put me at ease.

"And have you seen my ball, Ciriaco? I am fond of it, and it seems to have rolled away somewhere as I slept."

The hedgehog looked at the long grass uncomfortably. He wrung his hands even more wretchedly; he made a soft and sorrowful rasping noise in his shimmering throat. Slowly, the animal bent until his nose brushed dirt and his quills ruffled along his back, passing a glimmer of prism between them. And then, with a little hop, and an even littler tuck, he snapped up into the air and landed in a thatch of clover as a round, smooth ball all of gold. Perhaps a grown woman would not have squealed and clapped. But I was not grown.

"How did you come to live inside my ball, friend hedgehog?" I cried.

Ciriaco rolled forward slightly, then back, and unfurled himself again, patting dust and pollen from his golden hands as he rose to his full, though not terribly impressive, height once more.

"Your tail is very soft," he whispered, blushing to his tiny ears. "It has been a great comfort to me…"

THE TALE OF THE GOLDEN BALL

IN THE KINGDOM OF THE HEDGEHOGS, THERE are mountains with mouths. They open and close; they twist and sneer. Out from our hedgerows each pearl-handled morning, boar and sow trundle up the black paths, slick as tongues down the side of the crags. We do not speak to one another—it is not done. In the old days, it seemed as though the earth rose up with the sun to swallow the mountains again, so many little brown bodies made the ascent each day, silent shoulder to silent shoulder. We did not sing work songs, or tell tales of the brave hedgehogs who went before us, caged hummingbirds clasped in fear-tightened paws, into the dark.

The dark took them; the dark will take us. No more needs to be said.

I worked in the upper shafts, where gold ran along the rock walls like calligraphy. The Kingdom of the Hedgehogs possesses miners of all kinds: iron and copper and silver and gold, diamond and sapphire and emerald and tin. When we were born, our parents, rheumy-eyed from days on the mountain and pulverized silver shot into eyelashes, placed plugs of each substance into our tiny, clasping paws. Whichever we gripped tightly and waved about with the first and last glee we ever took in the fruit of the mountain, this we would cut from the earth for the rest of our days. Each family was possessed of a little wooden box full of gleaming slugs—and if a child should choose differently from his parents, it was the last he saw of them, as he ascended or descended among the shafts.

My parents were higher than I—diamond-diggers in the ethereal heights. My brothers and sisters were lower: a few coppers, a few irons, and one sorrowing tin-cutter, my sister who lay in our mother's arms for a single night before bucketing down to a tin-mother whose pup had gone up to the sapphire shanties. So it goes.

And if a child should not choose, if his paw was weak and clammy, or if he greedily grasped all metals alike, he was given to the mountain, and left to die or eat dirt as the hedgehogs before the mountain had done.

Such was the rhythm of life in the Kingdom of the Hedgehogs. We carried in our little glass-blown lamps; we carried out barrows of ore. We slept, we ate, we dug and chiseled and chipped.

I had a water drill I loved. It fit my palm very well—the years had worn paw-holds into the handles.

You may think we were joyless. Beauty cannot seed in joy. Diamonds are crushed from black rock; beauty is carved out of the dark by hedgehog quills. Our mountain was parceled out slowly to all the courts and all the crowns of the world. Slowly, over centuries, it shrank and shrank. We were satisfied by this: that dark may be chiseled into light, and that a jewel touched by a hundred paws might sit one day on a beautiful girl's innocent head.

In my day the mountain was still greater than anything else on the blasted plains, and I knew nothing outside of it. One day, we would take the last of the mountain to the last princess, and we would be free. So went the tales before the soldier tumbled onto us like a loose slate slab hidden behind a cord of gold.

It was in the upper shafts, my rose-throated hummingbird buzzing softly by my side, scraping her green wings against the twig cage, that we found her.

She had short hair, brown as fur, and an iron cap-helmet dragged down over it until it covered her brow. Behind her was a massive barrel, and she leaned against it, sleeping. She had no armor, no plates or chains or any of the other sorts of things that can be made out of the mountain-molten we bring down. She had a spear and a wide, round shield. And the circles under her eyes were like caverns without water, and in her ragged leather uniform her body floated thinner than lime dust. Her face was a mass of blisters and scars, stretching over her bones like a star map spread over a broken table. We did not confer with each other on her strangeness—it is not done. In my memory,

I seem to think I prodded her foot with mine. She started awake, clutching her spear.

"The pass is fast, don't fear, don't fear!" she cried, shrinking from the dark. We never shrink—but we have pity for those who do.

"Of course it is, it is our pass, our mountain. We have no need of you to guard it—come away, girl, away from the dark." I touched her hand with my paw, but she drew it away and curled her lips back.

"Duty may not be shirked," she hissed.

"Who gave you this duty? Surely not us, yet we are masters of this place."

She pulled up her shield to cover her, not unlike a blanket, and spoke echoes into all the chambers of the mountain.

"I am she who is called Widow, who was given this post in the long night now forgotten, and who will not now abandon it…"

THE SOLDIER'S TALE

DO YOU KNOW WHAT *VESICANT* MEANS?

I didn't think so. What good can such vocabularies perform for hedgehogs snuffling in stone? But I know—I know now.

The farm where I was young was thick and furred with wheat. I had two brothers, and they had me, and we had nothing else in the world but a father whose knees knocked hollow in the wind. I seem to remember plow horses and mules and chickens squawking in the dust, pigs and roving deer and great shaggy cows. But if ever I saw them, I was too young to do much but pull at the tail of one or the ear of another. In my youth the livestock of our country slowly dwindled to nothing at all—there were no blights or famines, no locusts or one-eyed witches poking fingers at the fields, but there were strange tales of a far-off kinswoman in need, and there were letters sealed in green wax, written on vellum so thin I could see my hands through it. But I could not read them, only pull at their edges like a mule's flicking tail.

"Kin may not be denied," my father grunted, and off went our dappled horse and our last milk cow.

My father took the plow onto his own shoulders with straps and brass buckles and with much pain. Grimacing through many red and screaming welts on his broad back, he tilled our fields. We grew up, my brothers and I. We were often hungry, though not too often. But I sometimes think that if we

had not once had plow horses and mules and chickens squawking in the dust, pigs and roving deer and great shaggy cows, we would not have given so much to have them back again.

One evening when the blue lay deep and even as water on the wheat, a lone man came striding up our walk with a sword at his hip and velvet in his coat and a warm helmet on his head. He led a cluster of horses behind him, stamping in the dust. He was recruiting for a King who lived so far from us that his name was to our ears as an oar presented to a mountain-dweller. This King was in need of soldiers for his conquests, which the man assured us were innumerable and glorious. This is what all Kings say. They are words a monarch learns before *mother* and *father*.

I learned the word *mercenary* from this man.

The recruiter offered his horses in exchange for the strongest and wisest of our sons.

"In a land without horses, what use is a boy?" he reasoned.

My oldest brother thought this was very exciting. That is what oldest brothers always think. My father looked at the horses, and at his son, and at the clear, cold sky.

"Kin may not be denied," he grunted.

And my brother vanished down the walk, asking to try the recruiter's sword a bit before he could get one of his own. We were glad of the horses, and my father released the straps and brass buckles and laid the plow onto better-muscled shoulders than his own. He had some peace, and so had we.

One afternoon, a year hence, when the gold lay hot and breezy on the wheat, another lone man came striding up our walk with a sword at his hip and velvet in his coat and a warm helmet on his head. He led a cluster of cows behind him, lowing in the dust. He was recruiting for the same King, who had conquered much, yet lived still so far from us that his name was to our ears as snowshoes presented to a desert hermit. This King was yet in need of more soldiers for his battles, which, we were promised, were mighty, clamorous, and righteous. This is what all recruiters say. They are words those tasseled creatures learned before *hunger* and *thirst*.

I learned the word *impressments* from this man.

The recruiter offered his cows in exchange for the second strongest and second wisest of our sons.

"In a land without cows, what use is a boy?" he reasoned.

My older brother thought that his destiny called him with long, bright horns. That is what older brothers always think. My father looked at the cows, and at his son, and at the hazy, yellow sky.

"Kin may not be denied," he grunted.

And my second brother vanished down the walk, his back straight and tall, his gaze on the path, never speaking to the recruiter at all. We were glad of the cows, and my father and I tasted milk for the first time in years. It was sweet and thick—I learned to strain cheese and in the silence of an empty house, we set to building a butter churn.

One morning, a year hence, when the silver lay pale and wet on the wheat, yet another lone man came striding up our walk with a sword at his hip and velvet in his coat and a warm helmet on his head. He led a cluster of chickens behind him, pecking at the dust. He was recruiting for the same King, who had conquered much, yet lived still so far from us that his name was to our ears as a feather bed presented to a scale-bound fish. My brothers, this man said, were dead and cold, and on a field without wheat, rain was filling up the hollows of their ears. Yet they died with honor, and we ought to have been proud.

This is what all soldiers say. They are words we learn before *left* and *right*.

I learned the word *attrition* from this man.

The recruiter offered his chickens in exchange for another son to fill the ranks.

"What use is a boy in a land without eggs?" he reasoned.

But my father shook his head and said: "You have taken both my sons from me and given me only meat in return. I have a daughter left, who may choose to go with you or not, as is her liking, but of boys there are no more to take."

The recruiter frowned. "My King does not approve of women fighting."

My father shrugged, a half-dead smile on his chilblained face. "Then you have no business here."

"No," I said very quietly. "I want to go. I will cut my hair and bind up my breasts and wear a heavy helmet—but I will go where my brothers have gone, and I will fight where they would have fought, and it will not be as though we

were together, but it will be near enough to it that I can sing to their shades under the branches of I cannot say what trees."

My father and my recruiter stared at me, the one grief-ridden, the other appraising. "Kin may not be denied," I answered my father's gaze, my own cast toward the earth.

They cut my hair together—in those days it was very thick, and I lay against a stump while they took turns hacking at it with a rusty ax. I bound my breasts by myself, for modesty's sake. The recruiter put his own helmet on my head—it had a chin guard, and sat heavy as guilt on me. I vanished down the walk. I asked the recruiter if he thought I looked like a boy.

"You look fit to make widows," he said, laughing cheerfully, and thus I took my soldier's name. We walked toward the hills, and the sun rose high in the sky.

It was not a full year before I took my first breath in the thick of the Five-League Fog, before my chest swelled up and burst like a drum struck with a knife.

In the Garden

THE BOY'S FOREHEAD WAS CREASED LIKE A WELL-READ PRAYER BOOK. He studied the moss, his shoulders stiff, and picked nervously at his fingernails.

"My father has sent many such men out into the world, and they have come back with all manner of soldiers trailing after them like baby quail. They all look very fine in their uniforms, and I have been promised a scarlet cloak of my own when I am grown."

The girl's face remained smooth and implacable as still water. "It is only a story," she said.

"My father's wars bring aqueducts and roads and bathhouses to barbarians."

"I am sure that is true."

"One of my tutors is from a conquered land. He tells me that he loves the Palace, and his thick, silken robes, and his children are happy."

"I would not doubt such a man. You do not need to tell me these things."

The boy frowned more deeply. His palms itched. The sky was a deep gray, stitches of night blue showing through the rough linen clouds.

"Sometimes I climb the persimmon tree to watch the officers muster," the girl confessed quietly. "They are handsome, and so tall. I did not think boys could grow to be so tall. The helmets blind me in their rows."

"One day I will wear one, and a long, curving sword besides, and no one will bring roosters for me."

The two children were quiet for a moment, and the dull disk of the sun cast fitful shadows on the stones, like hands which cannot quite grasp. The girl

watched the boy play with his purple bracelet, watched him avoid her eyes. As grackles and lost, bewildered seabirds wheeled and cried over their dark, bent heads, the girl thought it best to simply continue, as a soldier will when he has forgotten all save the hill before him, and his own heavy feet.

THE SOLDIER'S TALE, CONTINUED

HIS SKIN CAME OFF IN MY HANDS.

I never saw the King—I did not expect to, yet a tiny part of me, the part which imagined him leading his troops with raven plumes blown back from a silver helmet, was disappointed. The King cloistered himself in his castle, it was said, surrounded on all sides by rivers, one white, and one black. It sounded like a child's story, and in the days to come I wondered if there had ever been a King, if we were not simply marching and fighting and digging and eating horrors of worm and centipede and mud to keep starvation at our backs because someone, somewhere, had once simply dreamed of a King with a golden crown.

I am sure that someone, somewhere, has told that King's tale. I am sure it was grander than mine. I am sure it was an important tale, full of history and pageantry and grave consequences for the whole countryside. I am just a soldier. I do not know those tales.

At first I worried that I would be discovered—but after a few weeks in greasy mud and fog colder than the ice scrim on a pail of milk in the morning, one soldier looks much like another. I was never questioned. I was set a watch, and given a wooden sword. The men laughed like a treeful of crows and said that I would have to earn a real one. In fact, I wore more or less my own clothes, and kept my recruiter's helmet, though many tried to barter for it. The King, it seemed, felt iron and leather could be best used elsewhere. I was told to guard twelve barrels bounded in iron, and not to look inside them. Simple—

yet all I remember now when I think on it is his skin, wet and loose, sloughing off between my fingers.

We were encamped in the wide steppes which through the ministrations of hundreds of soldiers had grown thick with their autumn crop: mud. It clung everywhere: hair, eyes, fingernails, knees, throat, nose. It smelled of leaves and mushrooms and dung and us, for we could no longer tell our own smells amid the mud. The barrels were stuck in slime, green climbing the wood. With my ridiculous toy sword I stood before them, muscles corded with the care of cows and horses that had once been brothers, and peered into the night. A terrible tea was concocted from wheat seeds, caterpillars, and mud, and I drank it down at the end of every watch before feebly asking if I had not, through faithful duty, earned a real sword. One by one soldiers, bearded and bare, bald and hairy, chuckled and told me that I could not have a real sword until I had killed someone—what was guard duty when no one threatened my guard?

Yet we fought no battles, and I killed no one. Mold began to grow between the pommel and the grip of my plank sword. I waited; we all waited. My recruiter rethreaded his tassels in gold and went on to the next village. I asked after my brothers—but who could recall two boys now dead? I waited; we all waited. Once, only once, did I ask the only officer whose cloak still showed color, what was in the barrels. He paled and his mouth twitched as though he might vomit on my barely shod feet.

"It came from the King's man, before you got here. Suffice it that I know and you do not—be happy, and do not pray to trade lots."

I was a good soldier; I guarded my barrels. It was half a year before anyone came looking for them. Before his skin came off in my hands and I sucked in my last breath of clean air.

It was very black at night, like the inside of a great dark heart. Snuffles and snores and the occasional weeping rattled through the mist and the mud, the endless clammy damp. He came crawling like a centipede, this way and that, his helmet cracked wide across the crown, his cheeks hollow under coarse stubble. He must have been hiding among us for days, waiting for my watch, the skinny soldier with the wooden sword. He lunged at my barrels—I caught him full on the chest, hacking at him with my stupid, useless stick. I slammed it

into his eye a few times and he grunted, groaned, our breathing fast and heavy as we grappled in the mud, our weight pressing us knee-deep into the sodden earth. He punched me hard in the stomach but I did not let go, though the breath went out of me like a soul ripped free. We fell together into the barrels. I collapsed on top of him, and his sweating bulk cracked one of the vessels beneath him, grinding its shattered planks into the sludge. I scrambled up—and his skin came off in my hands.

My father used to tell stories about people who lost their skins: selkies and leucrotta and suchlike. Underneath, they are always something different, even beautiful. A girl in a seal suit is wet and pale and shimmering under her gray, rubbery skin. But this was not like that—there was just blood and fat and sagging skin, and he melted in my arms, slipping away like a coat shrugged off in the summer. The smell was thick and acrid as burnt cat meat.

A greenish white paste oozed from the broken barrel—pale steam already rose from it, curling and wafting, as though deciding which way to drift. It clawed the air before me and before I knew it I had breathed it in, long green trails of smoke filling up my chest, rubbing at my skin. Blisters rose before I could blink, fat and rippling on my arms. My eyes burned, something seemed to burst in me like a tiny sun, and I stumbled away from the man without skin, away from the ruined barrels.

My superior came running across the field of sleeping men, lugging water in two wooden buckets. He threw them onto the wreckage of bubbling flesh and pale, pasty sludge; hissing and spitting, the slime vanished into the earth, leaving a ghost smoke floating over all those dreaming heads, smoke that would leave them scratching and weeping, but well enough in a day or two.

"You idiot!" he mumbled, gently leading me to a thin little stream and dousing my head in the clear water. "It has to be diluted, it has to be mixed by someone who knows how—you don't just drop a person into it, and you sure as sword rust don't breathe in the raw stuff!"

"His skin came off in my hands," I moaned, coughing harsh and sharp, trying not to rub at my blistered arms.

He shook his head. "Of course it did. You smothered him in the Five-League Fog. The King's man sent it, that old horror in his collar and robes. It's to be used when we go into the mountains, when we take them for the crown. But

cut with water, you silly child! Cut, and blown out fine as ash through bellows! You're lucky to still have skin on your bones and eyes in your skull!"

As the shallow morning light dripped over the hills like white oil, he helped me to wash in the river, and he did not even remark on it when he saw my bandaged breasts, my ruined, reddened hips. That is how I learned what *vesicant* means: it means a thing which burns, which gets into you and raises up blisters like accusations—his skin came off in my hands, but my skin burned for years after, like a sentry torch.

THE TALE OF THE GOLDEN BALL, CONTINUED

THE SOLDIER'S HANDS SHOOK AROUND THE EDGES of her shield. She extended her arms slowly, letting the bowl rest against her chest. Under the ancient guards, they were covered in the same old blisters, huge and bruise-colored, hardened into burls, snaking over her flesh like a ruby chain.

"I breathed too much of it, whatever it was. It was only meant to make enemies double over weeping, and I had enough to suffocate a leopard. As we climbed higher into the mountain passes, it became plain that I was not going to recover. The blisters did not recede; I could not stop coughing. But as we began to fight real battles, as I finally came to have a sword of metal, it also became plain that I could not, any longer, be wounded. The blisters were good as diamond clothes—nothing could cut me. We took a village on those steppes —ah, the screaming of horses!—we took a village and a woman with her face tattooed like a demon spat three arrows into me without making a dent in my skin. I put my sword through her sister. Somewhere in the distance I saw a helmet with black plumes, and one of the cavalry said it was the King. I didn't believe him.

"After that, the men were spooked as horses in sight of a snake. Finally it was decided, before the rest descended into the valleys, that I would be left behind. I would guard the pass. I would, should the chance happen by, requisition from the conquered all the ore I could, to send below, to the troops who are ever in need of arms." She licked her dry lips, her eyes darting between us like a deer's. "I have been here a long time, years—maybe years. It is hard to

tell, in the dark. Sometimes I hear my brothers calling from the shafts. But I am not their sister anymore, and I cannot go down to them. The blisters are all of me, I float in their shell like a fog."

I frowned. "We own this mountain, but we do not dredge up ore for you or your wars."



Widow laughed softly, full of regret as a pail of rainwater. She snatched up one of the other hedgehogs quicker than a cave-in, dredged him in his wheelbarrow of gold flake like a piece of meat through flour, flipped her shield over in her lap, and rolled him around the edge, into the shape of a ball. From a spigot in the barrel she drew a few greenish white drops and smeared them into his fur, and kept up her steady rolling around the hard, bronze edge.

Onto the stones of the upper shaft she rolled a perfect golden ball, and then she reached for me.

THE HULDRA'S TALE, CONTINUED

CIRIACO STOPPED, HIS LITTLE GOLDEN MOUTH snapping shut like a treasure house door. I sat in the now-long shadows near the well, my mouth dry, my hands clasped in my lap.

"She rolled us all, in the Five-League Fog and in our barrows—she was so much bigger than we, and so much stronger than she seemed. For all I know she wanders still in the passes. Now our skins are hard as hers, and we were used as hard as she. She sent us down the mountain to the valleys, and we served a King we had never heard of. His name was to us as milk to a cattleless land." The hedgehog glowered and picked at his quills. "Did you know there was a war here, in this very place, a long time ago?"

"Don't be silly."

"There was. I was here; I fought. We were pressed into service as cannonballs. We learned new words, too. I was shot into the side of a bull elephant, and his blood swallowed me up. And after, when the fields were full of violets and blood-spattered balls, mothers began to take us home and give us to girls who were not sweet as cream and honey, but clever as bees. There was a war; I am a veteran. Does that make me sound brave to you? Does it make you like me?"

Perhaps a grown woman would have been more circumspect. "You are a golden hedgehog all my own! How could I like you better than I do?"

His red eyes flared and dimmed in the late afternoon light. The grass seeds and dandelion dust had settled around him in a floating halo of white. "That is

fortunate, for I am going to marry you. That is what I am owed, after all my loyal service—even ordnance should come home to wife and biscuits. I have been your toy. I like you; your hands have always made me blush. I have waited as long as I can, until you were grown enough to smile on me. After all the amusement I have given you, do you not think some recompense is due? This is what I demand, and this is what shall occur."

I laughed from my belly. I laughed as only children without fear may. "I like you, Ciriaco, but I am not going to marry you! Even if you were not a hedgehog and I were not a girl, I am only a child and very far off from fitting a wedding dress."

"I am the mountain," he growled. "I am owed. I have not forgotten who I was before the war—I must be fitted to a princess, an innocent girl whose fingers have yet known no rings. It is the way of things, and I will not be denied just because I am not a pretty ruby crown or a bracelet of silver and sapphires."

"Hedgehog, I am not a princess. My parents are grain merchants. We eat well and dress well, but it is a pretty poor kind of royalty, even among the huldra. Princess of bread and beer!"

"That is princess enough."

"I'm sorry, poor beast. I will not marry you."

I had hardly spoken when they came: gold and copper and silver and tin, ball after ball rolling through the grass, iron pitted and pocked, quartz streaked in grime. They opened up into hedgehogs, their red eyes slitted and sharp, glaring at me from beneath furrowed and shining brows. I stepped backward, as though a pail of water had been overturned at my feet.

"There are few enough of us who are left," rumbled Ciriaco in his yellow throat, "but enough to keep you safe and still. Your parents will not miss you—they gave you a golden ball, after all. Most probably they expected you to go missing long ago and are even now wondering why you do not get on with it."

I clenched my fists. "I am not wicked," I insisted.

"Then why have they left you all alone to amuse yourself with abandoned war relics? Why does no one call you in to dinner? Why does no one cry, 'Oh! Where has my pretty daughter gone?'"

I twisted my tail in my hands. "I am not a favorite—that doesn't mean I am wicked, and it certainly doesn't mean I shall do whatever my talking toy tells

me to."

Ciriaco growled, a sound like clock hands scraping together. At this the two hedgehogs nearest me, a cast-iron fellow and a sow of copper, leapt forward, drawing a handful of quills from their backs like young men drawing their swords. They each seized in cold, stubby hands the long ropes of my hair and with a little roll and a little flip, pinned my curls to the earth, driving their quills in like tent stakes. I tugged and wept but could not pull free. Ciriaco raised his eyes to me, moist and scarlet.

"If I say I love you, will you soften?"

"No, my own golden ball, I am only a child. I will not be a wife."

The other hedgehogs, smooth and ordered as a little army, began to tear into the earth as I struggled, pinned by their quills. They tore up strips of wet brown sod with bits of grass and yellow flowers still clinging to it, and began to build.

"I shall build us a house, Oubliette, a house for living and loving and cooking and dying, and you will live in it whether you like it or no," cried Ciriaco, and he danced with a terrible joy while his family worked, their backs shimmering in the last of the sun. His golden feet tamped the soil, and the sod bricks grew around me. "I shall be no one's ball again!" he sang.

Indeed, through the night they built up the house, and closed me into it like a rafter. By dawn only my eyes and mouth were left naked—and out of the cracks between the soft bricks flowed my trapped hair, with more quills than I could count wrapped up in the dark strands and plunged deep into the field, each lovingly contributed by the hedgehog architects. From a distance, all anyone might see was a humble sod house, with bits of old tree bark showing through the walls. The sheaves of hair stretched from the house like an awning, and Ciriaco reclined in their shade.

The other hedgehogs shrugged and rolled once more into gleaming balls. In the swelling morning, they trundled off through the now-bare field.

"I love you, Oubliette," said my golden ball. "Put your hand to my head again and I will put a quill ring on it, and we will be happy in the house I have made for you."

I cried quietly, my tears running muddily through the bricks. "Please, please. Let me go home."







"You are home—you are the very substance of home."

So it went. He asked to bend his quills into a ring every day, and every day I felt mud climbing my nose and refused. He was right, you know. No one came crying: "Oh, where has my pretty daughter gone?" No one looked for me. Perhaps a golden ball is nothing but a ball of yarn to lead difficult cats skipping away from their mothers. Perhaps I am wicked in some way I cannot guess, some way which a hedgehog or a miller's boy can see, but a girl may not.





Finally, Ciriaco left me during the evenings, satisfied at last that I could not pull my hair free, nor escape his house. He rolled away and out of sight, burrowing into leaves and blossoms for warmth, leaving me to frost and hardening sod. I felt as though I too were bounded in blisters like diamonds, clapped up in a cold mountain. My tears froze on the fringes of grass sprouting from the walls when winter came—and when winter came, and the house was dusted with snow, like a new grandmother's hair, my rescue came shambling into the field where I stood, my knees bent and burning.

THE TALE OF THE TWELVE COINS, CONTINUED

HER BREATH HAD MADE THE SMALL SPACE BETWEEN us warm.

"I don't think you're wicked," I said quietly, my voice filling the space as surely as a limb.

"If I were not, someone would have come for me, in all that time," she reasoned. "If I were not, I would not have been given a golden ball and told to go off and play. I would have been kept close to the trunk of my mother's body, and wrapped in her tail, the way I wrapped my ball." She turned her head away from me.

"If I were not, the ghosts would not have taken me."

"But you've done nothing wrong. Your mother left you to the mercy of a ball—mine left me to the mercy of the Stars. But I did nothing *wrong*. We are not wicked, we're not!" I curled my fingers into my palms. Oubliette only shook her head.

"How did you escape, finally?"

But she sealed up her mouth like a letter. Light sifted flour-thin through the shredded walls, and long gray fingers curled around her neck, around my waist. They pried us from our beds, plied us into clothes of paper threaded with dirty string, pleaded silently with us to eat what they had brought: handfuls of aventurine and garnet. We sucked them down—they were hard and chewy all at once. Our teeth split their skin, and they tasted like licorice, licorice and beets. The same grasping fingers pulled us from our meager food

and pushed us down that long corridor which led to the machine, which led to the Mint.

The workday had begun.

I tried to keep close to her, but it was impossible in the press of so many children. I could not see where she went, the one head floating shorn and strange among the others. Little voices rose and fell, paper trousers rustled—it was a little like school, save that we were all so afraid, so afraid. The Pra-Ita did not speak to us, but placed our hands where they wanted them, pushed our fingers as they meant us to move.

I was stationed at the edge of the great, arching thing. Already it hummed with moving bodies, lurched and swayed as though it were itself alive. It was Vhummim herself, to my surprise, who cradled my arms in hers. Her blue-white hair brushed my face as together we reached for shroud-covered baskets. Her diamond belly pressed against my back as we drew back the shrouds, and her wheat-stalk arms caught me as I fell away from the thing that she meant me to haul up out of the straw—for under the colorless gauze were the tangled limbs of children, glass-pupiled and sightless, gaping at nothing.

"It was better for you," she wheezed, wretched and worrying, "I told you it was. To work, and not to be minted."

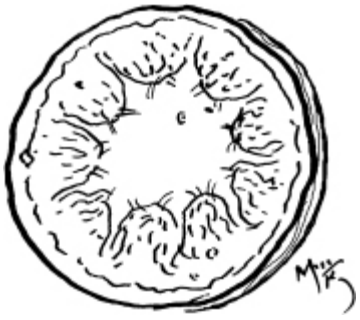
"You make *money*? Out of us?" I felt as though I might vomit, but kept the hard, chewy gems down.

Vhummim's eyes creased with embarrassment. "We didn't notice," she whispered, "when we wasted to nothing. We didn't notice, for a long time. Our markets were so busy—we could not cease trade because of a few ruined districts. Or even more than a few. Our economy kept our heads to the ground. And even after, we kept up our markets, oblivious. We only truly saw what had happened when gold and silver no longer shone for us, no longer warmed the fingers with their very touch." She cringed away from me—as though I stood in a place to judge her! "It meant nothing to us. Our jewels had no taste, our coin no weight. What does a ghost treasure? That which lives, that which is hot and hard. There is nothing more valuable than bodies, and we trade now in bone, we trade in it and mine it from the unwanted, we mine it and mint it and it goes to the new Asaad, where you first entered the city, and it buys pale shadows of what we used to love: apple cores and broken

stone and skin with no meat, glistening and thick. It is called dhheiba, this new money, and we prize it as we once prized silver, as we once prized the taste of topaz. I am sorry, but all things flow to the Asaad, and so must you. The living work."

I stared at the child whose arm flopped out of the basket, white and cold. It was a boy, with yellow hair and green eyes. His neck was bruised, as though he had been seized by long, inexorable fingers which squeezed and squeezed.

"See?" said Vhummim. "We spare you this task, at least."



I considered struggling and running from her, but she was surely stronger than I, and faster. She moved her arms along mine again, sinuous and silken, and gently lifted them to grip the boy by the torso, provided the strength, this first time, to heave him onto the machine, where other children, longer employed than I, dully dragged him along to shining blades which quartered him, eighthed him, and further, and further. The meat was cleaned from the precious bone somewhere in the belly of the Mint, and far down the machine, round coins emerged, stamped with the spider sigil, clean and white.

I worked for hours with Vhummim guiding my every gesture like some grotesque pantomime. I stopped looking at them, all those boys and girls—I just closed my eyes and reached into the baskets, closed my hands automatically. I could not look, I could not. Finally, a horn sounded from somewhere far off, and we were ushered away from the great hall and toward a trough brimming with sapphires. I shoveled them into my mouth as I once had brown beans. They tasted like pastry and milky tea. The diet of jewels had begun to disturb my stomach, truth be told, and I wished, fervently, for bread. The Pra-Ita watched us eat, as they had before, and stroked their necks obscenely. They led us without sound back to the barrack beds, and I understood, as my arms ached under the thin blanket, that this day was now every day of my life. I wept into the pillow, trying not to feel the heft of thin arms and legs still in my hands.

Oubliette climbed in beside me, shaking, her eyes wide as a wolf's, her teeth chattering. I held her so close to me I thought I might break her—but she clutched me with as much desperate strength, as much hopeless terror. We

spoke in quick-fire shots, like arrows loosed one after the other, breaking each shaft before it in mid-flight:

"Did you see?"

"Yes—did you have to—"

"Yes—did you do it?"

"I had to! Did you—"

"Yes—did you throw up?"

"No, but I wanted to. Did they tell you—"

"No!"

I told her all Vhummim had told me, and her tears were hot as boiled water on my hands. We shuddered together in the dark. Neither of us spoke for long moments, stretching out like wool around a spindle. At last, because I could think of nothing else to comfort either of us, I murmured against her bristly scalp:

"Tell me the rest?"

She began to talk to me, her voice dim and hushed as rain against a broken fence…

THE HULDRA'S TALE, CONTINUED

IT SIDLED, DID MY RESCUE. IT APPEARED UNDER the hoofprint moon, washed in white, the distant grass brushing its knees. My rescue approached hesitantly—it sniffed the air, stuck out its tongue once or twice to taste it. It took a few steps, then stopped to watch me, then a few steps more. The moon was very high by the time it was near enough for our eyes to connect like copper key and copper lock. My frozen tears shattered as I smiled.

It was a unicorn.

I have heard that unicorns are pale and perfect, all white and silver like a bride's veil—those are silly tales, told by sillier uncles and grandfathers. They are dark, dark as race-horses, brown and jet, with the tails of lions, and a boar's cloven hooves. They have little black beards that hang from their chins like unchewed grass, and their horns are not pearl and gold, but twisted bone, the stuff of antlers, twisted round in yellow and red and black. Those horns are thick as my own arm, and sharp as shears—but the horn of this unicorn was severed a little above the base, and the stump had bled, scabbed over, bled again. It was a mass of hardened, blackened blood, and only hints of horn gleamed through.

The mutilated beast sidled closer to me and though she drew back, much as a wild horse fearing that the hand that holds the apple has a mate which conceals a bridle, she nuzzled my cheek with her nose, soft as a mule's.

"I smelled you," she said. A unicorn's voice is a low, liquid thing, like pomegranate wine.



"I wonder you could smell anything buried in sod." I laughed. A unicorn is fearful to see, but it is not a hedgehog, and my heart was lighter for that.

"I smelled your innocence, like baking bread. It called me over the wood and the field."

"I am wicked, not innocent."

"Do not tell me my business. Innocence is a technical thing—I do not care what menial vices you think you have committed. I misjudged purity once, so you ought to believe I am careful enough these days."

"Can nothing be done?" I asked shyly, trying not to look at her ruined forehead.

"Like innocence, a horn once squandered cannot be regained."

I tried to shift my weight inside the house of sod, for my legs were stiff and heavy. Often in those days I wondered if I would grow in this hunched position and become a bent-back long before I became the kind of crone who ought to have one. The unicorn moved her dark eyes over me.

"You are in pain," she said distractedly.

"Yes. I'm afraid you cannot lay your head in my lap."

Her nose wrinkled. "I do not want to! Why should I want to lay my head in a child's lap? I am too old for such games!" Her eyes slitted in anger and could I have run, I would have, for her snorting and pawing were awful to see.

"I'm sorry. I ought not to believe dusty old tales—enough are told about my kind that I ought to know better."

She calmed somewhat, and moved nearer to me again. I looked up at her through my pinioned hair. "But I *am* in pain, unicorn, and should you help free me, if perhaps your head were to fall—in sleepiness, no more!—into my lap, who should blame either of us?"

She gnashed her yellow teeth a little. "If I free you, you will only run away and I will have to chase you, and then I will be sleepy indeed."

"I will not run."

"You will! You do not like me; you only want to use my teeth and my horn and such for your own ends—that is how all of you are. I am nothing but a shop to you, where you may reach onto the shelf and take anything you like."

"Then tell me a true tale—tell me how you lost your horn, and keep me company, if I am innocent enough to pull you over the fields like a plowshare."

A TALE OF HARM

I AM NOT INNOCENT. CONSIDER THIS: IF A UNICORN is innocent, if she is the core and pivot of all possible purity, why should she seek it out? Why should she care if some other creature is innocent, if she herself runneth over with virtue? Why should she, time and time again, though she knows better—she must know!—be lured from the deep and shadowy green-wood by the simple presence of a girl in a white dress? Ridiculous. We want it because we have no idea what it is, except that we know its smell, its weight, its outline against a gray sky. We want it because it is new. We go toward it hoping that we can touch it, that we can understand it, that we may become innocent ourselves. You might chase down a cooling cake, but not if your belly is full. So it is.

The science of innocence is complex and technical—I shall not worry your little ears with such talk. Suffice it to say the hymen is irrelevant, as irrelevant to us as trousers. The word *innocent* means *without harm*—did you know? Your mother ought to have taught you what a dictionary was. There is some debate, when unicorns gather, as to what, exactly, the definition ought to be: one who has not been harmed, or one who has done no harm. The smell is different, of course, and everyone has their tastes. I have always held that those who do no harm are the most rarefied creatures—which is why we draw back in such horror when the huntsmen come. Suddenly the dove who opened its little wings to us is a dove no longer, but a thing which has caused harm, great harm, which has brought arrows and knives, and smells like burning crusts, scorched flour.

It should be clear that whatever interpretation is supported by the majority of the herd, it is a thing we have no part of. We do not have this horn for hanging laundry upon, or water-divining, or lock-picking. It is for gouging and puncturing, it is for ripping the flanks of deer and punching through the shells of turtles. It is perhaps for piercing, even, the skins of innocents—I will not say that the first unicorn to discover one ran her through immediately, and the scent of her blood was so sweet and spiced that we have sought it ever since. I will not say it, but it may be true. We are carnivores, we are horses and more—we mate and maul and shatter trees with our hooves, we fight each other with tangled horns, we race with such speed that the earth is torn to strips beneath us. We harm. We are not ashamed of it; it is our nature. But like all things we are drawn to that which is our opposite. And we are harmed in our turn—oh, doubt it not, child.

And yet our horn is not a dead, mute knife: It is our secret self. When the wind blows it plays the slivers of space between red horn and black like a flute of flesh, and the most terrible and radiant songs are heard—but only by us. It is for mating, and for mothers with colts at their teats. I remember that my father knelt in a storm and let his horn sing me to dreaming once, when the forest was full. The voice of his horn was high and sad and bright as lightning, and I loved him. But he is gone now, and no storm can move me.

They used a boy.

In the green and bramble, his smell was sweet as plums and peppermint leaves. How do they find us? I suppose it is simple enough to track an animal, to find its drinking places, its sleeping places, its loving places. And by a pool clear as air they sat a boy down in the softly blowing dandelion seeds, a boy with large, calm eyes and the most hesitant beginning of a brown beard, told him to be very, very still, like a good boy, and he might see something to tell his children about.

I did not want to go. The scent of it is horrible and wonderful, and we all of us try to ignore it, to bend our heads into the roses and blot out the smell, to pretend that golden beehive up in the poplar is of much more interest. But eventually it wins out, the sweetness and the longing, the almost-memory of a thing which we are not, could never be, the curiosity, to touch such a foreign substance, like ambergris or the tails of crystal fish—to kneel in the lap of

grace and be touched, for only a moment, by something which smells of violets, and thick salted bread, and wholeness.

He held out his arms to me, and it blew off him like steam. I ground my teeth, but I went to him, foolish as a virgin, and knelt near him, knowing that next would be the bridle and the whip—but I could not help it, his innocence wrapped me up soft and golden and if I could but lay my head in the lap of that purity, I would know what light was made of, and warmth, and grace. He would not hurt me, the scent said; he was not capable of it.

He held out his arms to me, and slowly I sank into him. His hands went to my pelt, my mane; he gurgled a childish pleasure, and I opened my mouth to breathe him in. But the breath that came was not my own, for he sighed gently upon me, as though blowing out a candle. The secret music rose up, and I started in his embrace, for it was the sorrow-and-blood song, the marrow-and-grief song.

"What are you doing, child?" I cried.

"I wanted to hear the sound the wind makes out of you." He shrugged, his brown eyes warm and delighted.

"But how did you know of it? It is ours, our own thing, and not yours to play."

"My mother and father taught me everything about you, forelock to withers, so that when I found myself with your head in my hands, I would not hesitate…"

THE POISONER'S TALE

MY PARENTS NEVER WORRIED FOR EMPLOYMENT. They were poisoners, the best of their breed, and when they had a son, they called him Bryony, after the black herb that makes the palms itch until the owner claws them to gleaming ribbons. They resolved that I would be a prodigy among poisoners, and set about my training as soon as I entered the world.

My mother drank tiny slivers of mandrake, powdered finer than hummingbird wings, in her morning tea, and it passed to me through her milk. She rubbed my lips with hellebore, just enough to taste—brackish and foul, if you'd like to know, like river water after a storm. My father made fried eggs with translucent crescents of night-shade sizzling in oil, salads of oleander and monkshood, pies of yew berries and rosary peas. All these things they fed me, tiny portion by tiny portion, so that when I was grown, none of them could hurt me, any more than blueberries might hurt another boy. They delighted in finding new things to wean me with: cherry bark that causes a plague of gasping until the breath is entirely gone; foxglove that inspires riots of excited murmuring, nearly poetry, before a convulsive death; thorn apple, which grants extraordinary visions, then a black blindness. Once my mother bade me hold a sprig of mistletoe and one of hemlock in each hand and eat a needle of one and then the other, while she wrote down my descriptions of stomach seizures.

There were more exotic venoms—the saliva of a rabid wolf, harpy milk, basilisk bile. But we always found the simplest poisons to be best. You cannot

imagine what can be made from a buttercup.

It was, in its way, a happy childhood. I was loved, I ate well—and pinkgill is not at all an unsavory mushroom when used judiciously, and eaten by those whose bellies are staunch and steadfast as ours. We lived in a rickety, bare-roofed house on stilts near the long blue river, which was cold as a corpse's cup and prone to flooding. Poisoners are paid well, of course, but if one displays one's wealth, then one is often asked its source, and we thrived on a discreet business. The riverside was a poor part of town, where folk slopped their garbage onto the current and cursed their chickens in braying voices, and so we chose it, and my parents practiced their art on me with tender attention.

Curiously, however, the layering of poison upon poison in my blood did not prove entirely benign. My skin grew stretched and thin, like a snake's, and quite as untrustworthy. When I was just a boy, my father was teaching me to mix bilewort, holly seeds, and elephant ear to make a draft that would plant the seeds in the subject's stomach, resulting in a very festive arrangement bursting from their mouths a few weeks after application. When we finished, he spread a bit of the stuff on my tongue, like a sacrament—for my parents believed sincerely that death was a sacred covenant between poisoner and condemned, and like all sacred things, required due reverence. We give a person the world distilled, and thus deliver them from it. What more profound act can there be? I closed my eyes, prepared for profundity. The brew tasted dry and dusty, like flowers left too long in a white vase, but there was a sharp tang to it, an arrow of sourness that flashed bright across my throat.

I looked at my father, surprised, and held out my hand: A little holly sprig sprouted there, its berries vermilion against my skin. It grew smoothly from my palm, the child of some combination of oil and seed or root and blossom that I had suckled in over the years. We laughed nervously and trimmed the miniature bush down to the skin. Eventually, it scabbed over, but from then on I was occasionally plagued with effusions such as these, twisting out of my flesh like new limbs.

And so I became both source and practitioner—but I was not allowed to actually sprinkle the food or mix the draft, no matter how I might long to

experience the exchange of one world for another. My education was purely alchemical.



"If we let you loose the venom from your own hand, it might spook the unicorn," they said, grinning, knowing I did not understand. But I observed many poisonings while I was beardless and giggling, concealed behind door or hollow wall, beneath hanging tapestry or bed. Shall I tell you of my favorite, while we have the time? You must be curious—we are so alike, you and I.

The Doge of a far-off country, a place full of red rocks and red roofs and stoops dusty with sage and sap, was possessed of two daughters, the one devilish and heartless, the other sweet and good as milk. Such men are often afflicted thus these days. In this city of red rocks and red roofs, which was called Amberabad, the first child of the Doge was called Hind, and she was the sort that liked to dance with men and eat iced cakes and read books with pictures she ought not to see. The second was Hadil, who liked only to please her father. As they grew, alike in beauty and poise, the Doge frowned into his cups and weighed their differences. He was a complex man, and decided to teach them a lesson, though perhaps a switch to the back of one and a stiff drink to the other would have sufficed. But he was, as I have said, a complex man.

Now Amberabad was a prosperous, though small, city, which sat like a fisherman with his legs dangling in a salty spit of sea. A tiny inlet fed blue water into the center of the territory, and all along it grew weeping cedars, at which the young men would laugh, calling them the future wealth of Amberabad. For the present wealth of Amberabad was amber, which is so plentiful in those parts that one may walk along the narrow, rust-colored beaches and pluck wet, glistening stones from the sand. Some even fish for it, with fine nets of nettle and flax, drawing red-golden gems like salmon from the frothing water. The city smelled richly of resin, and strangely of burning

jewels, and cast its shadow in pale yellow streaks on the earth, for Amberabad was a city in the sky, suspended between the trunks of the great seaside cedars.

Long garlands of chicory, milkweed, and tightly budded roses wound around the delicate bridges that led from tree to tree as in some cities streets will lead from ministry to cemetery, and in others canals will lead from market to haberdashery. The people of Amberabad are exceptionally fleet of foot, and hardly any of them fall. The Doge's palace is, rather predictably, built out from the widest part of the trunk of the greatest of cedars, and all of its rooms are enameled in amber, studded with carvings of blossoms, women, soldiers, horses at full gallop, and any number of heroic scenes. All the rooms are red and gold with this gleaming material, and with the soft, furry planks of cedar which show through the occasional strategic gaps in the walls.

In these rooms walked the sisters Hind and Hadil. Hadil wore long strings of amber beads, lacing over her body in complex patterns, close at her throat and looping wide over her wrists and waist, crisscrossing her modest, high-collared chest. Her eyes were bright and gold as sap, her hair as deep a red as the most costly resin. Hind too wore long strings of beads, but hers were cast from amber pitch, the strange black ruin left behind when amber is burned to make that costly oil which her sister so resembled. These black beads whorled round, loose at her throat and close at her wrists and waist, crisscrossing her barely contained breasts.

In these rooms Hind tried to coax her sister to read the books she read, which had woodcuts no girl should see, and to eat cakes which would make her spidery figure ample, and to leave open the amber doors of their room so that men from other cedars might swing across the milkweed garlands and sing to them through the hinges. In these rooms Hadil tried to rein her sister close, and close up the hinged doors when the night streamed darkly in, and crumble the cakes onto the sill for passing birds, showing her sister instead plain brown breads and raw roots. She tried to train her sister's wanton eyes to prayer books which had no woodcuts at all, but only psalms and hymns, which Hadil would sing on the balconies of her high house until her voice became known as the Bell of Amberabad. In these rooms neither sister yielded to the other, and they sat sullenly upon their red couches, the one chewing her roots, the other her cakes.

"Why will you not play with me, as a sister should?" Hind would cry.

"Why will you not pray with me, as a sister should?" Hadil would whisper.

And so their father called upon us, and we traveled in our little caravan to this city, which, my father said, was over-fat, nearing the time for a fasting, as he usually said of the opulent cities where our arts were most appreciated. He was something of an ascetic, my father, tall and thin and imperious, his sparse hair gone slightly green from the same little drafts of poison to which I was happily accustomed. The Doge was unspecific in his letters as to the shape of the lesson, only as to its intended content. Thus we pored and pondered until we had devised what we thought an acceptable tutorial.

It was a very complicated boil: shattered oyster shell and quartered toad, lily of the valley and autumn crocus cut carefully from the insides of my cheeks, jack-in-the-pulpit and poached rhubarb leaves, smoked and reduced and thickened with cane for weeks. At the last, pearls were dissolved into the brazier, and toad eyes pierced and allowed to dribble into the mire. We baked them into sweet candies, with a light flavor of anise and dusky peppers, and presented them to the girls at a banquet, posing as cooks. I watched from behind my mother's voluminous chef's skirts, a little kitchen waif gawking at the finery.

They sucked them down happily, Hind greedily chewing and Hadil making small kissing gestures with her pink lips as the anise puckered her cheeks. It was some time before the effect would be seen, and we were invited to stay and enjoy the food we pretended to have prepared. I was sitting between my parents with an antler fork in one hand, poised to mouth a sliver of sheep's fat, when Hind turned to her father and said:

"When you are dead and I am Doge, I shall invite all the woodcutters and poets to this place, and they will write odes to the beauty of Amberabad and her two daughters!"

Hadil blushed. "When you have gone and I am Doge in your place, I shall cover my face in mourning white, and no images shall be made of anything at all for a full year, so that we may remember only your kindness, and your face."

Hind looked at Hadil with disgust. "When did you lie down under the surgeon's knife and let your heart be cut away? Can you not even once smile

with me and be my sister? Stuff your pinched face with your damned bitter roots and choke on them! May you—"



She did not finish her curses. Out of her mouth came a single pearl, large and white and shimmering. Hadil cried out in surprise, and from her rose-scented lips came a slim green frog, hopping unconcernedly onto the table. Another followed, and another pearl from her sister, and another frog. The table leapt with green and clattered with white, the Doge's beautiful daughters holding back their curled and perfumed hair with both hands as they vomited up jewels and amphibians.

The Doge scowled. "I told you to teach them. Teach the one that goodness is not enough, and the other that cold cruelty is too much. What is this? Precious jewels from the corrupt daughter, slimy creatures from the virtuous? You will get no payment from me."

My mother, always the orator, bowed low. "Your Grace, forgive me, but you do not see as we see. From the mouth of the child you judged wicked comes nothing but cold stones, lifeless, shellfish waste. In a seaside kingdom such as yours, they are too common to be called valuable. Beautiful, yes, and they have their worth, but they are just pretty rocks. Out of the other comes frogs, which you may consider ugly, but are food and clothing and curatives and poisons. They are eminently useful creatures in any clime, and she will never be hungry, nor anyone who comes near. Yet those who come near will as often as not cry out in disgust and speak not to her sweetness. Tell me I have not taught a lesson they will remember!"

The Doge laughed, and so did I. Hind hiccupped, and a pearl formed at the corner of her mouth. She stifled tears as one of her sister's frogs caught the jewel with his tongue and swallowed it.

I have heard that, swollen with pride in her frogs, Hadil became an inefficient Doge, caring only for her amphibian subjects, ordering every frog to be escorted across the road and hoisted on silk cushions, lest the poor beasts

suffer. She kept up her singing until no one could stand to step out of their homes, as she added songs for her father's shade and songs for the betterment of frogs and songs for the salvation of her lost sister. Finally, there was no hour left in the day when the Bell of Amberabad did not endlessly drone from its high balcony.

Hind, I have heard it said, went into the world, dropping pearls behind her and thinking no more on politics.

Perhaps we had too great a love of preaching. But we were clever and delighted each other and practiced our arts with a precision nearly unknown in these degenerate times. And I will take their place when they have gone. I will be greater even than they, for I need no wild wood to give up its savages to me. I am the wild wood, and to produce both pearls and frogs from maidens I need but to extend my hand.

A TALE OF HARM, CONTINUED

BRYONY PUT HIS HAND NEAR MY NOSE, PALM UP, and from it twisted up a thorny rose, cloying in its scent, which interfered with his own.

"You understand why I could not give the girls their candies. I did not, not then. But when I was older my mother and father showed me their books, and I read about you, about the unicorn, about the song that the wind plays on your horn. They told me that my graduation from their little academy would come when I had caught you and made my poisoner's cup, for no poisoner can afford to be felled by his own leafy thralls, and it is known that your horn makes all poison as harmless as water. 'There is a unicorn in this part of the world, and her name is Nevinnost, and we have saved you for her,' they said. 'Go and become a man.' This is why I have knelt by you, and held your head, and let you smell me all you like, the last wafting fragrances of my innocence, for I am eager to do harm in the name of the world distilled, eager to join my parents again in their stilt-house."

"I should have expected it."

"Yes, you should have. I hope I have been a soft bed for you, Nevinnost. I hope the scent of my skin is all you hoped for."

With this he drew a long silver chain from beneath him, and wrapped it round my neck. I recoiled—his smell had changed, slanted into acrid and burning, charcoal and soot and rinds of sour lemon roasted on white embers. He smiled and the stench worsened; my nose clogged with clanging, warring drifts of him, smoke and ashen logs, vinegar and limestone and his stinking,



cloying rose. As I struggled, they came. And surely you have heard this part of the story before: how the huntsmen came with their green hose and their brown arrows, and held me to the earth while Bryony sawed my horn from my head with a blacksmith's blade.

The wind made a sound like shrieking when the red whorls snapped and shattered. I bled—the black whorls bled and the ground was wet and slippery; I scrabbled against them but the blood-mud held me fast. Our horn is flesh, no less than your nose, and the blood spurted from me like a string of black pearls onto the velvet lap of the poisoners' son.

THE HULDRA'S TALE, CONTINUED

THE UNICORN GLARED AT ME, DEFYING ME TO tell her how foolish she had been to go near him, or that she was no kind of beast to have lost her horn. Perhaps a grown woman would have done this, but I could not.

"Nevinnost, I am sorry for what he has done. A boy once took a thing from me, and in its place I was given a golden ball, and now you see what has become of me. I am like you."

Her gaze softened. "I am not a unicorn if I have not my horn. I am only a mule with a beard and a very odd tail. You are still a girl. Though I am sorry for you. A golden ball is no thing to give a child."

"Please help me. I can help you, if you will release me. I will not call a huntsman. I will not call the awful hedgehog who bound me here. If I am innocent, you are safe."

"All things are innocent until they are not," she snorted, but bent her dark leg and pawed at the quills which bristled from my pinioned hair in untold numbers. She dug at the soft soil, bit at the slick metallic quills, but her teeth could not catch on their surfaces, and they were driven too many and too deep for her to reach. Finally she just stood before me, her brown flank glistening with sweat. The night sky was beginning to lighten in the east, a long, jagged strip of cold blue against the cold black, and I knew Ciriaco would be coming soon.

"My hair," I whispered. "Chew it off, and I will be loosed. If I am innocent then all parts of me are innocent, and you may taste of it, in my hair, in my

curls, a thing which your treacherous boy would never give. Take my innocence, and set me free."

Nevinnost hesitated, sidling to me and away just as she had done when she first approached, neighing softly and reaching out her long, bloodied head to me, then drawing it back. Finally, she began to graze at the black strands, just like grass, and in the dew-frozen morning, she severed my hair at its roots, murmuring as she did, in pleasure or in pain I could not tell. But she was somewhat overzealous, and she chewed my hair right to my scalp in her hunger and eagerness. I did not mind. Long after I could move again I let her keep at her meal, leaning forward when she could not reach me.

"You taste like the moon, so cold and so pure," she whispered in my ear, and began to kick at the sod bricks, by now turned to iron plates by the frost. I tumbled out of the house that my golden ball built—for I still and always thought of him as mine, and my ball—at Nevinnost's feet.

"You said you could help me," she said, still in a half-swoon.

I turned and clawed in the hard soil around those unnumbered quills, gold and silver and copper and iron and quartz and diamond and emerald and sapphire. I dug deep and as I dug I wept and grunted and cried out, all those months walled into the sod tower rushing from me like frogs from a good girl's mouth. My fingers were hooked and grimed, but finally I held out to her a bouquet of dirt-clung bristles, in every metal imaginable.

"It is enough," I said, sobs hitching in my voice, "for a new horn."

Nevinnost bent her head and nuzzled me very lightly. "My horn is a colored cup on a table far off from here. I cannot take another while it still lives—what would it say? But should it break, in lands I will never see, perhaps, perhaps, I shall know what wholeness is."

Very slowly, she sank to the ground and lowered her ruined head onto my lap. Blood had begun to ooze again, just a few drops, from the scabs on her severed horn. She closed her eyes and breathed very deeply through her soft nose.

I lay beneath her, feeling her weight, heavy as guilt.

THE TALE OF THE TWELVE COINS, CONTINUED

OUBLIETTE RUBBED HER SHORN HEAD ABSENTLY. "She took my innocence, what there was, into her, and then not only was I wicked, and ugly, and at the mercy of anyone who decided he loved me, but I was a grown woman, too, and bald as a vulture. I had hardly stumbled out of the field where Ciriaco had built his house of sod and child when the city blew in, and the Pra-Ita seized me up, knowing, as my ball did, that no one would come looking for me."

"I don't think they know—they just gather whatever the wind scours up—"

"They know."

I could say nothing. Instead, I slipped out of bed and hopped quickly around to the other side, the floor icy beneath my soles. I climbed in again, behind her. Gingerly and gently, I put my arms around her—I was a man, and ought to know how to do this—and pressed my skinny body against her bark-back, holding her and rocking her like my own child.

"You are not ugly or wicked or at anyone's mercy," I whispered. "Though you *are* bald."

She laughed a little, but as she warmed beside me, I felt her crying, quiet as pages rustling.

We worked at the Mint for seven years.

She kept her hair short, cutting it with the side of a sharpened gear. It was short and ragged, but thick, dark, over her head. When I asked about it, she shrugged and said: "My hair is hers now."

I cannot begin to tell how often the wind carried us, or to what crevices of the world. Sometimes it seemed that beyond the tattered borders of the city, it snowed. Other times I seemed to smell a sage-and-stone desert. There was never a lack of materials for the Mint. Mostly, we did not have time to look at those borders, or anything outside the walls of that place. We worked. We ate —opals and garnets and pearls and chalcedony and hematite and lapis lazuli and malachite dark and green. Vhummim was right: A topaz tastes like a peach. Once, when the quota for the day had been exceeded, we were given diamonds. They tasted like frozen lemons.

Occasionally, we slept.

They watched us whenever we ate, stroking their long necks in time to our chewing. The dead city traded and bustled, but ate nothing, drank nothing. They watched us like a play, and salivated. Some of us grew up—many did not. Like any machine the Mint was fickle and thirsty. Fingers were crushed and arms were torn from sockets; not infrequently an entire child fell or was pushed or jumped—ah, so many jumped!—into the gears and stamps. The first time it happened, I cried out, and my cry in that huge, silent hall was like a knife through the air. Everyone stopped, turned to stare. But they stared at me, and not the child who had swooned into the coin stamp and left a bloody stain on the boards. I had cried out; I had called attention to myself. They hissed at me to be quiet, and the Mint ground on.

By the time I was fourteen, only Oubliette was older than I. And by then, we thought we were strong enough, and clever enough, to escape. Gems are not nutritious, but the Mint gave us a dim and sallow strength, turning and twisting as we had to, shoving the stamps down, as she did, or shoveling dead children onto the boards, as I did. We did the same work for seven years.



And we shared a bed—not as lovers, you understand. I think I would have married her, eventually, except that marrying her would have been like plowing a river with a perch-drawn plate: I wouldn't know how to begin, and what would be the point? When I looked at her body I did not see breasts or hips or even a tail and rough gray bark. I saw money. I saw coins piled up in a

basket. I saw the money her bones could make. This is not the stuff of husbands. Some things you cannot put behind you and forget as though a golden curtain had closed on them. We shared our bed for warmth and company and if we had not I think one of us would have gone headlong into the gears long before. I scratched her bark and burls; she rubbed my neck. We helped each other return to ourselves when the work was done. After a while, we stopped sneaking about, and just filed into a common bed at shift's end. The Pra-Ita said nothing. There was always a new child for an empty bed.

On that night of all nights, as I cradled my tree-girl in my arms, she spoke, quieter than a single drop of water dripping from a roof:

"I am going into the machine tomorrow."

I started, turned her to face me, her dark eyes wide and calm. "What? Why? Why would you leave me here?"

"Hush, I'm not leaving you. I have found us a way out. I am going to crush my arm in the stamps tomorrow, after the shift bell. I will creep back onto the floor and put my arm on the boards. I will let the great glossy stamp sever it. I will make with it the dhheiba we need to buy our way out. An arm is not so much; I have another. But I will need your help to run the rest of the Mint—the scrapers and scrubbers and cutters and board-runners. I think if we are quick we can do it."

"An arm's worth of coin is not enough to tempt anyone in this place. They have hundreds of arms at the end of any reach."

"It will tempt Vhummim. She likes us. She watches over us. It will be enough."

I was silent for a long while, and the other children, young and new, snuffled in their gray beds.

"It is a good plan, Oubliette. But not for you. I will put my arm beneath the stamp, I will let it cut into my shoulder, and you will remain whole."

Her thick eyebrows furrowed and she scowled at me. "Why? You know you are an overgrown, scruffy-limbed infant when it comes to pain."

I held her face in my hand, cold skin on cold skin, her clipped hair bristling against the tips of my fingers like quills.

"My arm is bigger. We will get more money."

She said nothing—what could she say to that?

“You will cry out.”

“I will not.”

We held each other all that night, and she kissed—the only kiss she ever gave me—the spot where my shoulder joined my arm.

In the Garden

THE BOY HAD LEFT HER.

He always left her. Each morning, and the morning after that one. She did not mind, really—it was difficult to speak for so long, to remember so much of what was written on her eyelids, to be close to another child when she had been alone for so long. She had not known how that could tire her. And so it was that when he had gone from her, she often went into the placid Garden lake, to let the cool water, rippling like a dress pulled up above the knees, wash him away from her. The hard, round pebbles under her bare feet were comforting—she had always had them, and the lake, and the reeds, and the knocking cattails, and the moon and the stars, to stroke her to sleep. She thought of the boy, how eagerly she waited for him whenever the red sun sank below the pomegranate trees, yet how often she was emptied, when he was gone, like a painted vase whose water has been flung out onto the flagstones. It was so easy to miss someone, she thought, when you have never missed anyone before.

She knew her stories so well, she did not lose them when she spooled them out to him—she told herself this over and over. They were still her own, her own. But when the words of the tales passed her lips and wound into his ears, they seemed to become so solid, to grow limbs and hearts—bodies winding into each other like snails winding into their shells. When she had been alone, and whispered those tales into nothing more than the surface of a little pond or a thatch of blackberries, they had stayed thin and wispy, shreds of a gown

which did not quite fit her fluttering in the wind. She was happy to see them grow solid—she told herself this over and over, too.

Waist-deep in the lake, she turned her face up to the starlight, and the falling shadows of dwindling ash leaves. The leaves were all gray in the dark, their reds and golds seeped out like tales. She ducked her head under the water, once, twice—she had long ago stopped praying that the black marks would come off when she did so. She would be looking for him again by the next evening, she knew, but now she felt as though all her self was laid open, like shining tendrils, like snakes let out of their basket to wriggle in the world, and she gathered them in again, in the silver light.

When she came up for breath and cleared the lake from her eyes, a figure was walking nearby, cloaked in white and not her boy at all, some distance from the violet-bordered water.

It was Dinarzad.

Her hair flowed behind her like the shadow of a much taller woman, and her feet were bare on the grass. The girl feared Dinarzad had gone mad—proper amiras did not go about thus. But she seemed calm, did not weep or tear her hair, but touched the trees lightly, as she passed, as though looking for something. Finally, she saw the girl in the water, half submerged like a lamia or a mermaid, and froze near an orange tree which was still glossy and green in the forest of bare branches. The girl said nothing—when one approached a strange animal for the first time, she knew, sudden movements would frighten it or enrage it, and if she did not want a terrified goose on her hands, surely she did not want a terrified princess.

Dinarzad opened her dark mouth and squeaked. She tried again, her voice clearing like a winter sky.

"I wanted to hear… I wanted to listen—"

She bolted, a doe caught before an arrow. The girl watched her go, not knowing what she could do to make the woman stay. She had never tried to make the boy stay, once the tales had begun. He was naturally faithful as a sleek hound.

And so it was not surprising when he found her near the moss-drenched stones the next night—it was only as much as she had come to expect from him, expect and anticipate, though it cost her. He brought her a round cheese and a slice of pastry. They whispered and ate as they had always done until the sky had gone as black as it might, and she could begin again in secret and in safety.

"I want to hear more!" the boy said excitedly, clapping his hands. "Dinarzad didn't speak to me all day—it was like a holiday! Tell me how they escaped!"

The girl smiled softly and breathed deeply, opening up her tales again, herself, like a reliquary full of sacred bones.

"Seven was certain he would not cry out when the stamp pressed down on his shoulder—he would be brave and stalwart, stoic and true…"

THE TALE OF THE TWELVE COINS, CONTINUED

I SCREAMED. OUBLIETTE PUT ALL HER WEIGHT on the stamp and it slogged into my armpit, mashing skin and bone and blood together. It did not sever on the first try, and I whimpered, I groaned like a woman in labor as she loaded up the stamp and brought it down again. I think I may have fainted away, for I remember waking to her tightening a strip of one of the corpses' dresses around my stump. She held the tattered shoulder to the hottest parts of the machine, which glowed a baleful red, and I probably screamed again. It was a wonder we were not caught—but then, the children often cried out in their sleep, often screamed, often wept. Perhaps I should have let Oubliette do it after all. She would not have screamed.



I remember staring at the ruined arm, which was once part of me, once my own, and would be no more. Those were my fingers, fingers that had gripped pens and bucket handles, cow teats and apple cores. Those were the lines on my palm, that foretold who knew what future. It was my body we put through the Mint, laboriously, my blood we smelled as it wet the innards of the machine, as we turned the gears and moved the pistons with her two hands and my one. It was my body I heard crunched under the final stamps,

and my body I saw emerge from the mouth end of the machine's arc, the mouth which had been shaped into a tooth-wight's grin.

Twelve coins, pale and round, of clean, gleaming bone. All we had in the world, out of my own flesh, like a wet fruit cut out of its skin.

During the midday meal, we found Vhummim watching one of the girls devour translucent tourmalines as though they were the first cherries of summer. She stroked her neck. She stroked her diamond belly beneath her rags. We smeared our best smiles on our faces and called her to us.

She did not seem to notice the arm—so many of us were mangled there, another injury was no foreign thing.

"We want to leave, Vhummim," Oubliette said firmly.

"I am certain that you do, little one. All is not as it was, when Marrow was the center of the world and no man wished to leave it before his pockets were full of lapis and his arms full of women. But you must know I cannot help you."

"We do not want your help," my friend hissed. "We are citizens of Marrow now. We have paid our taxes, we do our civic duty. And we have the right to trade, just as anyone."

Vhummim cocked her head, her bluish hair falling into her face like waxen icicles. "You have no money to spend, precious ones. No dhheiba. What could you possibly buy with air?"

Oubliette drew out our purse. I was still half faint and ashen; I did not trust myself to handle the coins without dropping the whole lot to the rubbish-floor. One by one, she fed the coins into her palm until it was piled high, and held it out—six, only six coins in her shaking hand, to buy our lives back. The grain merchant's daughter knew to hold something in reserve, in case the ghost drove up the price. Vhummim licked her lips with a colorless tongue.

"That is not enough to buy your ruby breakfast," she said, but she did not look away. She and Oubliette locked their gazes for a long time, a kind of silent bartering I could not enter. Finally, the foreman spoke, her glassy eyes drooping in her skull.

"In the days when we ate all possible things, the rarest transactions were the most prized, even if they were no more than a twig traded for a feather—if the

seller of the twig were a man with one eye, and the seller of the feather a woman with a beard, it was called a success. No worker has ever made this offer, and I will accept it, in the name of the old Asaad. But you will leave under the vault of night, and I will boast of my trade only after you have long gone, lest it be judged less rare than I think, and I am punished."

We agreed, and she took the coins in her long, spidery fingers, closing them over the bone reverently, with a strangely kittenish moan of pleasure.

"It was like this," she murmured, "before, in the time when all possible things were bought and traded, and the silk was high and red over the Asaad. The feel of economy was like this, light and thick and sweet. I remember it, I tasted it long after I could taste nothing else, the memory of Marrow the lost, which was called Shadukiam in days now dead and cold."

She closed her eyes and looked up through the ragged roof, her gray throat ululating in grief and longing.

THE TALE OF THE CROSSING, CONTINUED

A WIND HAD PICKED UP ACROSS THE WATER. THE surface was dull and flat, gray as a maiden's eye, and moving quickly, wrinkles forming and traveling around the little ferry.

"I suppose Marrow seemed a fit name, considering their new vocation, better than their old one, at any rate," Seven mused.

Idyll chuckled and shifted under his cloak. He stroked the hunch of his back with one hand thoughtfully. "Shadukiam was a place of wonder once, boy—those roses blowing through your door once covered the whole place in a dome of flowers. There were silver towers, and diamond turrets. There were women in purple and men in scarlet. It smelled of algae and gold. Do not speak of what you do not know."

"I know enough of that stinking, windblown hole!" Seven said hotly, his breath fogging in the icy air.

"Because you know a corpse does not mean you knew the man."

They lapsed into a woolen silence. Seven pulled up his collar around his face with one awkward hand and scowled into the breezes whipping his cheeks. He could see the clouds bunch and knot in the northern sky, not dark, as rainclouds ought to be, but pale. They were simply gathering, a great snarl of white, like cotton wound sloppily round a spindle.

"The storm is coming," Idyll said quietly. "She's early today. I don't know if we'll make land by the time she blows through."

"I have weathered storms before, old man."

"No doubt, a brave thing like you. But lake storms are a breed apart."

"I *am* brave," Seven grumbled. "If I were not brave, I would not have come here. I would have drunk steaming cider by a hearth instead of this, built a house, had children. I am going to save her. She saved me. We kept saving each other, even after the Mint. What else can I do?"

"Nothing, son," said the ancient ferryman, his voice relenting to softness. "No one who crosses this water ever had another choice." He poled the silt-stuck bottom of the lake, and somewhere far off, a bird keened, a gull or cormorant. Seven thought the trees were closer now, that the silver line of a beach gleamed below them, but he felt sick with the rocking of the ferry, and his eyes were rubbed raw by the wind's fingers. The sky was so blank he could not see the sun, and he thought he smelled a coming snow. Idyll's cutting voice sank into his thoughts.



"Tell me, how many of those awful old things do you have left?"

"One," the young man said. "I saved two. One to get me to her, the other to get us back. I saved enough for this, for her. That's all that's left."

"And that leaves four to fill out your tale, before the storm screams in and there is no more room to talk beneath the white winds."

Seven nodded and coughed roughly. "Four. Four coins for a cripple and a monster to ply the road—that's all there was outside of Marrow, once Vhummim had punched through the fish-bone wall at the edge of the city for us. Roads, paved and dirt-packed, cobbled and painted and bricked. We followed one, we might have followed any of them, but we followed that one, and now I am crossing a lonely lake to her, to her, my sister and my friend…"

THE TALE OF THE TWELVE COINS, CONTINUED

We chose a road, and for the first time in seven years, a golden sun, hanging in the sky not unlike a ball, shone on our skins. It turned us red. We swam in blue rivers and splashed each other. We ate blackberries and walnuts cracked with flat stones. We did not work. Yet when we swam and I saw her naked flesh shoot by under the cold, clear water, I still saw nothing beautiful, only dhheiba, lurking beneath.

We wandered for a long while, she and I. We might have searched out our homes again, or homes which would suit us now, but we had, by mutual agreement, done with cities. We kept to the green orchards like foxes, and sucked at sweet owl eggs. Autumn was beginning to swell the apples before we saw anyone on our road, and I am sure we looked quite feral by then. Oubliette's hair was even growing long and shaggy, crow black, framing her face like rough hands. We had no mirrors or shears, and my hair was longer than hers. We were in quite a state—though happily gorged on apples and rabbit haunches, as we were between us quite clever at catching them. After agate and jasper, soft meat and crisp fruit were miracles to us, and we sought them out, starving. And so, when we heard the cart clattering down the lane, we were still in rags and shoeless, but fatter than we had ever been.

The cart had two great wheels, which towered over the thing itself, painted blue and spangled with silver stars. A little wagon was suspended between the wheels, with a peaked gypsy-roof and round windows. Doors opened in each side, and it seemed spacious enough; maybe it was even pleasant to sit inside

and watch the spokes clack by. It was drawn by a lithe man clothed all in green —hose, doublet, fetching little cape and hat, all greener than apple skin. He had hair the color of egg yolks that stuck out from under his cap and a thin, affable face. His feet, from the knees down, were the spindle-swift legs of a dun brown gazelle, and his green hose ended just before the fur in a brass buckle, old enough to have gone slightly green itself. Oubliette and I stared, our mouths gaping.

"Well, good morning, little ones! How does the glabrous day find you?" he said, curtseying as well as his legs allowed. He did not let go his long blue poles, and his voice was like a thrush's chirping song. He smiled—his teeth were small and bright and sharp as a fox's.

"Good… good morning," I said. Oubliette held my hand tightly.

"You are fortunate to have crossed paths with us, my wastrels! I can see you are in need of civilization, and art is the midwife of the civilized soul. We are performers and minstrels, singers of songs and players of scenes, catamites and castrati, the finest and brightest and best-dressed of all of these. For a coin we will show you the world on our stage, for two we will teach its ways to you. I am Taglio—juggler, dancer, eunuch, acrobat, and scenery-wrangler, and superlative knight of the cart!"





We introduced ourselves shyly, but neither of our hands went to the hidden purse. We could not afford to spend my body on this colorful man, no matter what he promised. He beamed at us with sparkling green eyes. As we looked closer, we saw that the silver stars were simply bits of tin suspended from the wheels. The paint had worn in places, from a startlingly dark and vivid cobalt to pale turquoise. The effect was very pretty all the same, and the stars made a tinkling sound in the breeze.

"Wouldn't you like to have a little dance?" he trilled, hopping from one hoofed foot to the other. "A little scene—'The Princess and Her Faithful Cat,' perhaps? 'The Huldra, the Bull, and the Tree'?" Oubliette looked stricken, and Taglio hurried on. "Or something more grown-up, as befits two upstanding young things such as yourselves? 'The Murder of King Ismail'? 'The Rape of Amberabad'? 'The Siren's Seraglio'? Or perhaps just a song, a card trick, a coin from behind your ear? We are flexible, we are amenable, amicable, and amiable, as all must be in times such as these. We too are hungry for sparrow pies and blueberry cordials, and barter our talents for such reasonable fees."

A large red paw emerged from one of the blue windows. It stretched lazily, extending its scarlet claws and retracting them again.

"Who is that, Taglio my pet?" a low voice came from behind the bird-skin curtains. It had a growl to it, but was not unpleasant, like rubbing fur against the grain.

"That will be my mistress and my partner, the other half of my 'we,' my menagerie, my muse, my terror, my darling!" said the green man, finally setting his long poles onto the dappled ground and gallantly opening one of the moon-round doors of the spectacular cart.

Out of the blue stepped a Manticore.

I know this now, because she has since carefully shown me all the parts of her body and explained their origins and uses, but then she seemed an outlandish vision, and I could not have named her for a hundred bone coins. She was a lion, of sorts. Her pelt was red as leaves, and oiled to a glossy shine—

but her head was that of a woman with enormous blue eyes, the same blue as the cart, her aristocratic face framed with stiff, wiry hair the same shade as her fur. Haloing her head like a mane, it flowed back over her muscled shoulders like a genteel shawl. As she exited the cart completely, her tail came into view—it was that of a great serpent, mottled green like old copper, scaled and scabrous. At its tip was a scorpion's barb, hard and shiny as a beetle's carapace.

"Grotteschi the Red," Taglio crowed, "actress, beast, mezzo-soprano!" The Manticore inclined her head modestly, her ruddy cheeks high and lovely. There was something strange about the line of her jaw—it did not close quite right, like a child's broken music box, but it was wide and generous, her lips like a swipe of blood. In her jaw were three rows of sharp yellow teeth. "Will you not hear her sing? It is worth five times anything you might pay to listen, I swear by my Absentia." Oubliette crooked a quizzical eyebrow, and the gazelle-man grinned. "A eunuch is lacking in some things, and flush with others. That which I do not possess are naturally absent from me, and thus, in polite company, I refer to them as my Absentia. We must all be allowed our little eccentricities. If you will sit yourselves down on the grass—a cushion fit for lords and ladies of twice our collected ranks!—I will tell you the tale, should it please you. The first taste is always free."

The Manticore rolled her bright eyes.

"How can they decide if they want the whole show if they do not get a taste of us?" he protested.

"Go on, then, and don't complain to me when it's mice for dinner again," the red beast retorted.

Taglio smiled his sharp, glittering smile, tapped the earth with his hooves in a shuffling two-step, and began.

THE TALE OF THE EUNUCH AND THE ODALISQUE

SING, OH, SING, OF THE GRACEFUL GASELLI! Nimble and fleet are their boot-black feet, and sweet are their whistling songs! No shepherd more steadfast than we, no firefly so quick on the wing, no melodies lighter, no lyrics brighter than ours—than ours!—on the sheep-spotted fields of home!

We are the bringers of grace, we are the players of the goat-horn flutes, we are the fire-tenders in fields where hay has been bundled and wheeled. But light up your camp and find us gathering near, stamping our hooves on the grassy ground, stamping our hooves to the beat of your drum, stamping our hooves to the sound of your wine-sped violas! But kindle a flame and see us creeping in from our sheep and our cattle, creeping in from our milk and our meat, creeping in from the dew and the damp and the pinwheeling, heart-reeling ergot on the rye, the wheat, the golden, gleaming grain!

And if in the morning you find your wife has gone missing, if in the morning you find your brother run off, if in the morning you find your number one or two less than the night before, it is not our fault, we are but animals, and follow our bestial nature, as you do, as you do, else there would be no fires and no wine, no songs to thresh the mind, no whirling, no wheeling, no slaughter-sheep bleating—and what would our lives be then? Yes, we take one or two, but what do we give you? Fire and wine and songs in the mind and whirling and wheeling and lovely girls bleating—we give as good as we take.

Yes, sing for the Gaselli. These are my people, and we are well sung. We hunt the campfires out in the low dells, and do we dance? Do we sing sweeter than any twanging country harp? Bet on it. Are we lissome and lithe, are our faces fair, do we kiss like poets imagine they do? And are there one or two gone in the morning? Bet on that, too. By our green you shall know us, our green coats and our green skirts, trailing behind us so that only those who know to look will see those boot-black hooves a-gleaming. And what befalls those lucky one or two, who in the damp, ashen dawn are nowhere to be found?

All creatures under the Stars must eat, my dears.

We are shepherds—to eat the sheep we tend would be an abomination, would it not? To eat cattle and goat would be obscene! How could you even suggest it? What perversion you describe! Be off with you, now, else you shall feel my hoof!

But wait. Perhaps there was a Gaselli with hungers like the ones you expound. Perhaps there was one who did not like the taste of girl, even less the taste of wiry Gypsy boy. Perhaps he thought lamb and roasted cow smoky and rich and sweet, perhaps he thought goat salty and soft to his neat, white teeth. Perhaps his name was Taglio, and perhaps he stands before you. And it is not impossible to imagine that after years of secret meals and pantomiming at the revels, pretending to gnaw a bone or lap a wound, he was caught gorging himself on a little lamb who had died of the cold. But this poor Gaselli begs forgiveness! What it was that caught me at my feast is hard and hard to believe.

It was a cow. This does not strain the mind, I am sure! But it was a cow the size of a barn, with eyes like the forked spaces between flames, depthless and black and glittering fair! Her flanks were dun-golden, smooth and muscled, showing girl white, sow white, wool white skin beneath. Her hooves were bronze, her udder full and firm as a moon, her nose flared trumpet-wise, the breadth of her chest enormous. Yet she moved, I swear it so, without sound over the grass, graceful as a trained horse, and her hooves burned the earth where she stepped, sending up sighs of steam.

There was a light about her, I tell you true. It was not a glow, but a light that hung within her, like the shape of a second cow. I fell before her, on my knees.

“O Great Heifer of Heaven!” I cried, for my poetry had not left me. “You have come to punish me for devouring your children! But they were sweet, and I am weak!”

She regarded me calmly. When she spoke her voice vibrated in my bones. “I eat. Why should you not?”

“Because Gaselli eat dancers, not the flock. We are to eat drunkards who cannot find their way home through the mere—not a poor, defenseless cow who never knew where home was to begin with.”

“I know where home is.”

“I daresay you are not defenseless, either!”

“I have not my brother’s horns, but it has never been a worry to me. I have not my brother’s heart, either. I shed my hiding place to taste the salt-sweet grass and listen to the lowing of beasts, for these things are as cool water poured over my forelock when I have been cloistered in the stone and the dark for so long. He never cared for the grass.”

Sing for the Gaselli! But also sing to them—for we are beloved of tales, and they are beloved to us. I knew her then, and scolded myself that I had not known her before. Had I not myself told tales of Aukai, the Milk-Star, who makes oxen of bulls with a snap of her jaw? Had I not told of the mad castrati-monks to frighten the calves in their crèches? I fell to my knees, my own small, furry knees, below her great, shining face—beauty beyond any dancing girl with a red shawl and blue stockings. Her light filled me—I could hardly see for the glow of it!

Perhaps it is not right to explain how a man is moved. Perhaps he ought to keep the logics of light and blood and heaven locked tight within him, with a chain and a snapping dog before it. Perhaps it is enough to say that a man with graceful feet and a tongue more graceful still was struck dumb by the radiance of a cow, pierced with shame for all he had eaten in her image, cut through with adoration of the smallest shadow cast by the flick of her tail. How can even the most quick-fingered of minstrels convince his catgut harp to tell what ecstasy is? I am the most quick-fingered of minstrels, and I cannot.

What did I say to her? I swore things. I babbled like a lost sheep. I would join those who cut themselves in her honor, for her love. I would do the penance her brother refused. If she would but touch me I would die at her lowing. It is

hard to recall now. Ecstasy slips the mind. But before she could reject me—might she? I could not let her!—I drew my sheep's shears and did his penance and mine there on the long grass. My blood mixed with the blood of the flock, and with her light, her milk-light, lying on me like a forgiving hand. The pain was a ripping, a gouging, keener than horseshoe nails pounded into me, and my green trousers were a sudden red—but her light was with me, and filled me, and the silver singing in my head was greater than any shear, the silver, woolen singing which stopped up all but itself, the silver, wild, and woolen singing which I shall not forget for all my cart-drawn days.

Below her I lay in a sop of blood. She watched me, calm as a cloudless sky. She blinked.

"What sad, strange things you are." She sighed, and lumbered away over the low hills, scalding the weeds as she walked.

Perhaps I was hasty. Perhaps I was foolish. But I never liked the Gypsy girls anyway. Faith is always embarrassing in the morning. The other Gaselli recoiled—if I had been a secret deviant before, I was unmasked. I left them with little remorse. Let them revel and eat and revel again. It did not interest me. But I found, in the wide world which does not smell entirely of wet sheepswool, cowhide, and goat-hair, that the opportunities for a eunuch are limited.

I did not wish to be a spy, which is the chief activity of my, if you'll excuse the expression, breed. To be a spy is no better than to be endlessly dancing in the midst of a throng you intend to devour, and I had had enough of that. I had no patience for the intrigues of a chancellor or advisor to any sort of king or treasurer. And when it came to it, the chief activity of the monks of Aukai seemed to be to rattle their Absentia in little cedar boxes and brag about how long it had taken them to faint from the pain. That did not seem to me to be the most sacred of pastimes. It seemed logical enough, therefore, to choose what was left to me, and travel south through the orange-blossomed jungles to the lands ruled by those who kept harems. I had been a shepherd of flocks which looked and smelled far worse, after all.

And so I came to shepherd the Raja's women, who were varied and beautiful as a herd of horses, swift and sleek, red and brown and black and golden, their hair dipped in frankincense and braided up in pearls, their skin kept firm with bamboo switches, and bound up in yellow silk, for this color marked them as the Raja's, no less than a chair or a shoe. Of course, my clothes, too, were yellow, and I mourned my lost green, but I belonged to the Raja, too, down to my name and my boot-black hooves.

I was happy—I soothed the new ones when wars brought them trembling to my care, the older ones taught me to play cards and juggle, the ones in between told me tales I had never heard before. There were so many women, in truth, that the Raja could not possibly visit them all, and thus he was not much a part of our lives, a specter only, looming in the distance. And every night, there was lamb to eat, and chickens, and goat, and quail eggs, and deer flanks. No one even suggested that I might eat a girl.

Immacolata was not a concubine, or a wife, or even a war prize.

She was an odalisque, which made her like me. She was a virgin who served the harem. She did not guard them, but dipped their hair in frankincense and braided it up in pearls, hardened their skin with bamboo switches and bound them up in yellow silk. She painted their breasts with bronze paint when they were called up to the bedchamber, drying their tears and working the most wonderful calligraphy on their skin, like the tracks of jeweled spiders. Her own silks were red, red as the blood of my body that night under the Star, and she moved among the others like a scarlet ship in a golden sea. I will not say I did not watch her on those tides. I did not cut out my heart on that long grass.

One day she came to me—she came to me, a yellow-bound fool, to me!—and drew me aside, to a long golden couch, and sat me next to her. Her hair was a river of smoke, curling away from her stark brown eyes and amber skin. She was all the colors of expensive teas, dark and golden and burnished. There were no pearls in her braids.

"Have you seen the new wife?" she asked, her timbre low as an iron horn.

"No—I did not know we were due."

"I have seen her. She is not kept with us. But if you would leave this place as I would—"

“Why would I want to leave? I chose to wear yellow and play cards with the old wives.”

Immacolata looked at me as though I was mad. Her eyes widened, and I could see the oily gold with which she lined her lashes. “I thought you were like me,” she said quietly.

“I am!” Foolishly, I clutched her hands. She snatched them away.

“No, no, I wish to leave this place more than anything, more than I wished to be a bird when I was a child, or to learn the craft of tea-making, when I was grown…”

THE TALE OF THE TEA-MAKER AND THE SHOEMAKER

I DO NOT REMEMBER BEING MADE OF TEA. My mother told me this story, and then my father told it to me, and it was the same story, so I am sure that it is true, or at least that they have agreed upon it.



Saffiya was a shoemaker, and she lived in her cobbler's shop, which had a copper bell over the door and a knocker in the shape of a sole. She was not a beauty—but among her shoes no woman would shine. She made shoes of blue silk and shoes of black leather, shoes embroidered with scenes of leafy forests and flowers as intricate as a fingerprint. She made huntsman's boots and soldier's boots and boots fit to withstand a Quest, and she made dancing slippers: shoes of gold and shoes of silver, shoes of fur and shoes of glass. She made tiny shoes shaped like cups with woolen sides and iron soles for her cloven-hoofed customers, and long, knitted socks for the serpentine. She made three-toed shoes for aviary custom and gently shaped iron into horseshoes. She had even made, as an experiment, a large and generous single

shoe, with space to wiggle the toes, in case a Monopod happened by. On this great shoe she carefully stitched scenes of wine-making in expensive violet thread, dyed with the saliva of a certain snail. Her most famous shoes, which none had yet been able to afford, sat in the window like a relic in a shrine. They were made of raw black silk and green thread, and had soles which were so fine they would not dare to whisper on a floor of pebbles. It was said that they felt like the dreams of Saffiya when slipped on the feet. Among her shoes she was plain and hardworking, her hair the color of leather laces, her eyes the shade of well-worn soles.

Elpidios was a tea-maker, and he lived in his teahouse, a small place with a grass-thatch roof and long rows of tea plants before and behind. He was not a beauty—but among his teas no man would shine. He made green teas that tasted of warm hay and sunlight, black teas that tasted of smoke and sugar, red teas that tasted of cinnamon and blood, yellow teas that tasted of frankincense and dandelion root. He made delicate white teas that tasted of jasmine and snow. He made winter tea from the last dried leaves and twigs of the harvest, and this tasted of bread and grief. He made teas from cherry blossoms and chrysanthemum petals, rose and lotus, orange peel and magnolia. Some of these tasted light and sweet, like clouds drifting from the sun; others tasted spicy and dark, like thick cakes. His most famous tea, which none had yet been able to afford, was brewed from white tea leaves, violets, and a single red leaf. This was the tea that tasted of the dreams of Elpidios, and he priced it dear. Among his teas he was plain and hardworking, and his hair was the color of oolong, and his eyes were the color of wet leaves.

One day it happened that the tea-maker found himself in want of shoes, and the shoemaker found herself in want of tea, and these two met. She fitted shoes to his feet; he fitted tea to her throat. For her he made his dream tea, and held his breath while she drank. For him she took down from the window the slippers of black silk and green thread, which would make no sound on the floor of his teahouse.

She sipped the deep red tea and exclaimed, “Why, you have been dreaming of me!”

He slid into her shoes and exclaimed, “Why, you have been dreaming of me!”

And so it was.



Now, the years went by and though Saffiya stitched her shoes and Elpidios steeped his tea, they had no child of their own. Saffiya was not greatly troubled, as she had plenty of baby shoes to make without adding any of her own, but Elpidios longed for a daughter, and his teas began to taste bitter and brackish, and he no longer made the dream tea at all. Finally, he went to his wife and said:

"The ways of the world are marvelous and strange. Let us take my finest teas and fashion them into the shape of a child. We will place her in one of your shoes for her cradle, and let her lie under the light of the Stars. Who knows what may happen?"

"Husband, this is not the way of making a child."

"Let us try. And if it remains a pile of brown leaves with no life in them, I shall forget that I ever dreamed of a child, and begin to brew my tea of white leaves, and violets, and a single red leaf once more."

Saffiya was mild and even-tempered, and she knew that madness must play itself tired if it is to pass. She made a sweet green shoe with crimson teaberries on a snowy hill embroidered on its sides. It had a little heel of cherry-wood. On the tongue she sewed with infinite care a living chrysanthemum with sixteen petals. But when it came time for Elpidios to reveal his tea doll, he refused.

"There is one leaf missing," he said, and departed for the highest hills with a sack on his shoulder. He was gone through the fall and into the winter, and Saffiya began to worry for him. Perhaps she should have made sturdier shoes for him, she thought. She drank a pale tea of dried birch bark and strawberry leaves he had left behind, and stroked the sweet green shoe. But at length Elpidios did return, smiling his old smile. In his hands he held a slender leaf, the color of the moon shining on an open well. He told his wondering wife that he had heard of a place where a tea bush grew that had been touched by a Star in the first days of the world, and that he was certain now that their child would wake.

So together they placed this shimmering leaf in the center of the tea doll, and placed the doll in the shoe. In the long rows of tea they laid the sweet green shoe, and waited.

For many days nothing happened. Saffiya assured her husband, for by now she had begun to hope, that all children take time to grow. Elpidios paced in his teahouse. Finally, they heard a crying in the tea rows, like a kettle boiling. The tea-maker and the shoemaker ran out into the long leafy paths and found there a little girl wailing in a sweet green shoe.

But I do not remember being made of tea. I suppose no one remembers what the world looked like from inside their mother.

We lived happily and well, and I drank the dream tea every day, and found how often my father had dreamt of me. I grew to wear the sweet green shoes on my own brown feet, and found how often my mother had dreamt of me, too, when my father was in the highest hills. I learned to make green teas and black teas and red teas and yellow teas, and white teas like melted ice. I learned to stitch forests and flowers and fashion shoes of gold and silver and leather and glass. In time, my parents died, as parents will do, and though I was younger than I would have liked when this occurred, I dried my tears. I made both the famous tea and the famous shoes, and I believed myself complete.

But as they were not beauties, I am not. Even when the procurer came with a sword at his hip and velvet in his coat and a warm helmet on his head, I was not beautiful enough to be stolen for the Raja's bed, only for his prison of silk and bronze. None of the girls in our village were spared service of some kind or another, and I was made a slave to slaves, maid to the wives and concubines. I paint on their breasts as once I drew patterns on the silk for stitching. They are unhappy, and I do not know how to soothe them, for I am unhappy, too. But I make for them the dream tea of my father, the tea of white leaves and violets and a single red leaf, and hope they taste my dream of a life outside.

I served this tea not long ago to the newest wife, with her fifth child already at the breast. She sprouts children like berries, this one. She is very beautiful in her white veils, and her black eyes are so deep they seem to have no pupils at all. Her hair falls past her waist in long black curls, and it shines most curiously in the candlelight, like the skin of a salamander. She fixed those depthless eyes on me as she sipped my father's tea, holding her golden cup with both hands.

"I am sorry for you," she said, and her voice moved against me like a stone crushing millet. "But if you would not waste to less than an old brown leaf in this place, come to my bedchamber on the third day of the new moon." She set

down her cup and put her hands to my face, the light in them terrible and wonderful, like a judgment, like a promise. I was weeping before I knew it, the nearness of her bright and awful and endless. “I swore to him not to incite the harem,” she murmured, “but an odalisque is not a wife, and I can see the leaf your father placed in you, glowing still. Because of it we are sisters, and I cannot abide a sister’s suffering. Tell the eunuch who keeps you that Zmeya commands you to attend her.”

She kissed my cheek, gentle as a thrush singing.

THE TALE OF THE EUNUCH AND THE ODALISQUE, CONTINUED

"YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND," IMMACOLATA SAID. "For you, this is a pleasant world, no different from an open pasture speckled with sheep and horses. But we are not sheep, and we are not horses, and we did not ask to be shepherded, nor corralled for the use of the biggest bull."

Her last words stung like a crop—had I not done the penance of a hulking bull? I hung my head.

"I will take you to Zmeya's chamber."

Immacolata seized my hands and her hair brushed against my arms. Her red silk rustled against me. "Come with me! There are better things in the world than this, I swear it. Why would a eunuch care so to deliver bound women to an intact man? You owe him nothing—come away with me! I have watched you; you have watched me. Let us not pretend otherwise." She cupped my face in her hand. "I know you are Gaselli, yet you have never hurt us, never."

I tried to protest that this was no act of chivalry, but she stopped my mouth with a copper-ringed hand, cheap baubles empty of stones and thrown away by other women, which left green bands on her fingers. Before my widening eyes, she turned one of the pronged rings inward and pressed it into her neck so that blood welled bright as her veils and trickled into her collarbone. I did not understand—but she pressed my face to her neck. I opened my mouth to assure her again that I did not want her flesh, and her blood slipped between my lips.



She tasted like tea. Of all the dancing women in their shawls, she alone tasted sweet.

I took her gift, and her hand. When she walked with me to the great harem door, the bells at her ankles sang—and no one marked our passing from that place.

THE TALE OF THE TWELVE COINS, CONTINUED

"I TOOK HER TO ZMEYA'S CHAMBER, AND IT IS true what they say, that Zmeya was a great snake beneath her woman's skin, but we did not trouble ourselves much about it, I being half gazelle and Immacolata being all tea bush. Deliverance was as simple as an open window. We went into the wild together, Immacolata and I."

Oubliette's eyes were wide. "What happened to her? Why is she not with you now?"

Taglio grinned his feral grin and danced a lazy step or two. "The first tale is free, the second must earn its way in the world."

"We have nothing to give you, I'm afraid," I said sorrowfully. "You must see us as we are—poor in all things save blackberries and road dust."

"That is a tragedy true, my young master," the eunuch said with a sigh.

"Where are you headed?" I asked.

"Over hill and dale and mountain, river and desert and possibly those blighted hills and dales again—to Ajanabh, where we have heard artists of our caliber are welcomed," thrummed the Manticore's voice. Grotteschi's warm, spiced tone seeped into me, and I shivered. Oubliette and I exchanged looks. Perhaps we had not done with cities.

"We cannot pay you for a song or a scene, but if you would accept company, we would travel with you," I said nervously, overexcited as a groom.

Taglio frowned. "Much as we might enjoy little ones, they are expensive to maintain."

I breathed deeply. “We cannot pay for trifles, for songs and bells and flutes, but if you will take us in, that is a great enough thing to pay for.”

Oubliette gripped my arm. “What are you doing?” she hissed. But I smiled at her, a smile I hoped promised games and warm afternoons and songs with new friends, and no more dank barracks, no more paper blankets. I tweaked her tail a bit, as I did when she was grumpy. She relaxed, but her grip did not lessen. I squeezed back, and she drew a single dhheiba from our purse. The Gaselli and the Manticore recoiled, but could not take their eyes from it. I felt the weight of it in my hand, my own flesh. Was this what Vhummim meant, about the thrill of the rare trade? I felt sick.

“That would buy an army of children twice your size,” the green man breathed. He took it solemnly, and closed it away in his belt. I did not let it go easily, but I let it go.

“Can you sing or juggle or act? Can you balance on a branch? Do you have any interesting deformities?” Grotteschi tore at the uncomfortable silence and peered at us, a buyer canvassing horses.

“I can juggle,” Oubliette said, blushing in the face of the great lion. “I once had a lovely ball, and I learned well. And—” She turned slightly, so that her bark-back was clear, and flicked her dun tail with a flourish.

The red lion’s face softened, and Taglio’s mouth opened slightly, in shock and recognition. The gallant little man sank to his knees before my friend and put his hands to her face.

“Oh, poor child of Aukon! You should have said so from the first,” he whispered.

In such a way we joined the pair of them on the road we chose, which led to a lake and a cold, gray wind.

Though we asked to walk with Taglio, panting to hear more of Immacolata, he insisted that Oubliette ride with the great scarlet Manticore and not trouble her little feet. I would not leave her side—I would never leave her, never—and reluctantly, we slunk off toward the jangling blue cart, and climbed inside the waiting door, making room for ourselves in the coil of Grotteschi’s thick, mottled tail. We inched closer to the beast to avoid her green barb. But the tail

flesh was warm as a sun-baked brick, and we were soon quite comfortable. The feel of it beneath our backs was soft and firm, but we could feel her pulse, low and thick as a huge drum.

She turned her remarkable blue eyes onto us. The shaggy red hair around her shoulders thickened on her neck and chest, curling below her chin so that she really did seem a maned lion, king of the pride, save for her woman's face. She licked at the stiff, wiry fur.

"You want to hear of the odalisque, yes? Of the tea-maker's girl. You would rather walk out there, on the hard ground with the moon slapping your heels with her bony hands, than in here with me. Taglio thinks he can tell stories, but the songs of the Manticore are famed by those who survive them, and I knew her, too."

Gingerly, Oubliette reached out a hand to stroke Grotteschi's brilliant fur. The serpent-lion purred and hissed all at once, and her eyes softened.

"Listen, darling, infant things! And tell me I cannot sing as well as a gazelle…"

THE MANTICORE'S TALE

SING, OH, SING, OF THE SUN-MUSCLED MANTICORE! Thundering fleet are their scarlet feet, and great are their echoing roars! No hunter more patient than we, no serpent so sour-tailed as we, no snarling leaps lighter, no long teeth brighter than ours—than ours!—on the scrub-spotted deserts of home!

Ha! Let us have none of that. Do not sing of us. We do not want your songs. We will sing, and you will listen.

The desert is wide and white and dry as an old bone. We worry it, we gnaw and tear and peel it bald. And we sing when the moon is jumping on the sand like a skinny white mouse, we sing and the saltbush weeps. The oases ripple under our breath, the blue and clear water where the rhinoceros wrangle, where the cheetah purrs and licks her paws, and the Upas trees waver green and violet in the scalding breeze!

They will tell you the Upas is a death-bower. They will call it the hydra-tree of the desert, and warn that if you sleep beneath it for even a night, you may wake, but to no morning man has known. They will say that three hundred soldiers all in bronze and feathers camped beneath an Upas once, to drink from the clear stream that flowed beneath its branches, and that by the time the sun touched their toes all were dead and cold as dinner. This is ridiculous, a fairy tale. But I suppose it is yet not entirely untrue, for the Upas is our

mother, and we are enough of death for anyone. And if soldiers camp under an Upas when she is blowing her seed, it is no fault of the hungry kittens that tumble out if they find their supper plump and laid out on the sand.

Look, passersby—though not too closely!—at the radiant Upas, lover of the Sun in his golden bedchamber, her red branches thick and strong as a haunch, thorny and pitted, her green needles far too glossy and stiff to grow in the thirsty desert. Look at her fruit, nestled in the shadowy forks of her knotted trunk, how scarlet and purple, how thick and full of juice! Touch one at your peril, for these gleaming berries are not fruit but eggs, and it is we that grow within them, in the crimson sacs which wax in the blistering scrub-light, full of the peculiar Upas yolk we drink and drink, which fills our tails with enough poison for a lifetime, until we rip that silk-thin skin and tumble out headfirst into the water, or soldiers, whichever seems most convenient.

I remember the Upas milk. It was sweet, like blackberries and blood.

In the fruit sac we know all things: how the Sun preened on the face of the oasis pool, how one Upas, though neither the tallest or most beautiful thing in the desert, opened up her branches and grasped the reddening beams for her own. Her wood warmed and the pool rippled—the Sun would not have noticed if his mirror had not been marred. He would have been angry, and scorched the tree for her theft, had not the first Manticore fruit burst open before him, and if he did not think the little cub with her needle-teeth and her whipping tail and her sky-bright eyes was the most lovely of all imaginable things, and immediately set about teaching her to sting and roar and sing and kill, all the things he knew. The Upas smiled, and told her sisters how to follow her lead.

After we fall, it is harder to remember these things, to know they are true. But we do our best to love our parents and turn our prayers to the sky and the sand.

It is only unfortunate that we are more or less helpless when the Upas blows us free. No more fierce than little red kittens or infant snakes, blind and wet and mewling. Our tails do thrash quick and sharp in those first hours, indiscriminate, for we have not quite learned to control it when the oasis, littered with palm nuts and antelope ribs, catches us in green-gold arms. This

is when the wranglers come, if they are clever, with their silver tail caps spangling in the desert light.

I would like to tell you I was reared in the open flats, the white and worried bone, that I tore open leopards and antelope and rhinoceros, that I remember what that tough gray flesh tasted like, and that horn. I would like to tell you that the Sun and I ran together, bounding red-pawed over the saltbush and the pale weeds, that in the warm red rocks I rolled with my legs in the air, scratching and roaring and eating as I pleased. I would like to tell you that the echoes there taught me to sing. I would like to tell you I was happy, and that the Sun was high in the sky.

But the wranglers came with a little silver cap, something like a thimble with buckles and straps, and armored in polished metals splashed with the last desperate strikes of countless kittens, lashed the thing to my barbed tail. My thrashings were dull thuds and sprays of sand, but nothing more. I howled—it is not only the province of wolves. I howled and that did startle them, for the voice of the Manticore is terrible and piercing and sweet, the sweetest and most terrible of all possible voices, like a flute and a trumpet playing together. It is barbed as surely as a tail. I howled and keened, thumping my useless limb against the ground pitifully. They took out wax stoppers and closed their ears to me, and into an amber cage I went, clapped in an amber collar, and gagged in leather to keep me silent.

Tell me again how the Gaselli sing. Tell me that no melodies are lovelier than theirs.

The heights of the amber city made me dizzy. The platforms spiraled up and up those impossible cedars, and on the spindly bridges I nearly fainted away, so far below did the ground sway and wobble. They pulled me up with squeaking pulleys and moving flats drawn up with wet ropes. I retched into the muzzle and choked on my own bile. The green branches cut the clouds as I rose and crumbled against the lifting floor and sobbed against the straps which bit into my face until I tasted my own blood with every lurching inch upward. I hitched and gagged, bewildered, as afraid as any lost beast. But I was close to the sky, so close, and the Sun beat my back fondly.



The amber cage had an amber lock, and there was a girl with an amber key. She kept it on the beads that slung around her like chains, dangling right at the base of her throat. In those days any number of creatures were brought from every hovel and height in the land to delight this creature, whose clear, calm eyes took in everything with equal regard and due. She was dutifully amazed at my fur and my tail, dutifully frightened at my muffled roar, dutifully patted my head, and dutifully passed on to the next wonder of nature brought up the trees for her pleasure. She took no joy in any one animal over any other, and her voice was genteel and grateful when she thanked the wranglers for bringing her these miracles and grotesqueries. By the latter, she meant me, and thus I was given my name.

For some weeks she came, dutifully, to visit her menagerie, escorted by wranglers and noble nursemaids and occasionally her father. She played with the pygmy elephant and the wobble-kneed young Centaur whose legs were bound in her absence so that he would never grow to shame her with excess height. She had a Djinn whose smoke had gone out and a fish in a great glass bowl which owed her yet two wishes. Their games were odd and solemn—she sang to them and sat them to tea with amber cups they could not help but break, and scolded them for their manners. She forced their struggling heads onto her breast and all exclaimed it a miracle that her gentleness of spirit and purity of heart could charm the most savage of monsters.

She did not charm me.

After attempting to get me to drink from her dainty cups and sing with her while she did her sewing, she declared with great sadness that the beast she had named in jest was truly a grotesque beyond salvation, and that I should be sent away, for I was surely, in my unfathomable heart, unhappy there. I knew this meant the slaughterhouse or simply being shoved off the platforms into the narrow spit of sea, but what maiden knows how the world is skewed to spare any testing of her virtue?

When she and her escort had gone, a small, dark shape remained, silhouetted against the door frame of the wretched zoo. It came into the light, and I saw that it was a girl like the other one, and lost interest—save that she came and knelt by my cage, and, loosing a strand of black beads from her throat, put her own amber key into the lock, and opened the amber door.

"Poor Grotteschi. Do you see these beads? When amber is burned to make resin, this horrible black stuff is left over when the golden oil pours dutifully into the catch. No one wants it. It is garbage. I, too, am what is left over from her, what is thrown away when she has passed over it, what remains in the corners when she has swept by."

She put her hands to the muzzle's buckles and let it loose. By then I had grown, I was the size of a small horse, but the muzzle had never been changed. My jaw would never close quite right again. She did not mind my teeth. She rubbed my chin and my cheeks, wiped at the hardened blood with the hem of her dress. Her name was Hind. She was a good girl, and I slept in her bed from that night on.

Even when I was fully grown, she slept curled between my paws and demanded iron supports for her pitifully delicate bed. Together we snuck into the libraries at night, and she taught me to read from the books kept on the highest shelves, which I could reach for us, stories of lost girls and lost beasts and grotesques like us. She brought me cakes from the kitchens, covered in icing, so much thicker and richer than the mashed and rotten meat of her sister's zoo. When she became more beautiful even than her sister, I used to sing at her window to the men who gathered there to play their flutes or harps. They scattered when faced with my superior songs, and I padded back to Hind and her black beads. I was happy. The Sun was high in the sky. Happiness, when you look back on it, seems so brief, but then, with her, my whole life seemed to pass by under the flitting cedar shadows. Until the day she ran into our room and slammed the door behind her, her chest heaving under those black beads, her face flushed with tears. I ran to her, and she buried her head in my mane. Finally she drew back and sobbed horribly, a long, broken howl—I remember when I howled that way.

A pearl fell out of her mouth.

THE TALE OF THE TWELVE COINS, CONTINUED

GROTTESCHI'S VOICE HELD US FAST. OUT OF HER misshapen jaw came a strange, lilting tone, low, rasping, but sharp and keen as a plucked harp string.

"Someone had poisoned her," she moaned, "having no business in Amberabad but to vex my friend, because her father did not like her books or her cakes or her pets. What kind of a person fills their larder by punishing other people's petty complaints?"

Oubliette and I shifted against her tail, and I glanced over at my short-haired friend under my eyelashes.

"You're telling the wrong story," I whispered. "What about the tea girl?"

Grotteschi stared at us, her eyes bright and amused. "What an impatient couple you are. I was getting to it, you know. So spoiled by my friend in green! You like his story better, because it has a harem. Young boys always like tales of distressed women in silk."

Oubliette elbowed me hard. "I like this story. Be quiet," she hissed.

The Manticore rolled her eyes.

"Very well; a performer must always play to her audience." Oubliette dared to creep closer to the red lion, resting gingerly against her ribs. "Hind begged me to take her away. She promised that she knew how to use the floating platforms, and we could run from Amberabad to another city, where her affliction of pearls might be of some use to us. And so the girl strung with black beads packed her cakes and some few of her precious books and climbed

onto my back, proudly astride, as her father had told her over and over not to do…”

THE MANTICORE'S TALE, CONTINUED

We descended together through the branches and clouds, onto the long road, and she clung to me all the way down, her long fingers gripping my mane so as not to fall while I bounded off the last amber plank. I faithfully kept my tail from curling tightly upward, as the recalcitrant thing is wont to do, so as not to hurt her. We stepped onto the thick grass and my friend laughed to feel it, solid ground beneath her. We went into the world, in search of this other city, and it was on the road to that fabled place, which was called Ajanabh then as it is now, that we met the oddest couple trundling along the seaside paths.

I am sure there is no need to describe my Taglio to you. Was his hair longer in those days? Were his eyes brighter? I cannot tell. He did not wear green then. Immacolata had shredded her red silk, but kept it knotted into her hair as a reminder of her bondage, braided bright against the brown. They were beautiful. Taglio played his pipes and Immacolata had become a kind of tinker, though her tea bags were never far. They made a meager living through sleight of hand and the odd set of tongs played for a hunk of bread and a chunk of cheese. They told us their tale, and that they did not know where they were going, only away from where they had come, and they had been already years on that hungry road. Hind, being fond of pets, asked them to go along with us to the city of spices, which was so far from where we stood that it might as well have sheared off from the map of the world and gone drifting on the underside of the parchment.

“I am lonely for company,” Hind said. “Though my red beast and I love each other, I think she would be glad of another beast, and I of another woman. In Ajanabh there must be spices for your teas that you have not yet dreamt of. In Ajanabh there must be meats roasting that you could not begin to name. Come with us, and tell us tales, and eat our cakes, and read our books, and become as beloved as you may.”

When she finished her speech, her hands were full of pearls. The couple stared at her.

And so we traveled. With Hind spitting her pearls word by word, we were rarely hungry. Taglio taught her to juggle and pantomime; Immacolata made us tea over countless campfires. They were happy—there are many ways to be happy, and they had theirs. They pulled coins out of each other’s ears and made countless cups and shoes vanish, only to reappear to gales of high-pitched laughter, like owls hooting in the wind. I envied them, and so did poor, lonesome Hind, who had no more pretty boys at her window, only me to sing to her. Every evening the red-braided girl would take the Gaselli behind clusters of trees or reeds and let him taste a single drop of blood from her throat. Her neck was a pattern of tiny scars, like a star chart. Hind watched this in silence, standing alone near the fire with her hands clasped tightly together. Whatever she thought of their ritual, she kept to herself.

Slowly the sea became long, grassy valleys, and in one of these valleys we stumbled into a shantytown of brilliant and varied colors, tents breaking the low morning fog like the masts of ships. It was something like a circus, performers of all kinds rubbing the sleep from their eyes and stretching their legs, strapping on stilts and polishing trumpets, practicing violin scales and barker calls, elongating any number of legs into graceful steps. A hundred voices trilled octave to octave, a hundred lines of tragedies and comedies bellowed out from a hundred obese contraltos.

As we descended into the cheerful maelstrom, Hind clung to me, unsure of so many strange folk. Immacolata stroked her hair. A woman nearly collided with us on the path through the tents, driving before her a massive boar which walked on its hind legs, a little yellow cap on its head and yellow ribbons hanging garishly from his bristly neck. The woman was rather short, slender as a cracked whip, dressed all in goatskin, fur hanging gray and coarse from

her arms, her waist, all the way to her tiny ankles. Her eyes were a keen, narrow gold, and her hair was blue as drowning. She held a long churchwarden pipe in one hand, its mouthpiece glittering green.

"Watch where you wend, friends, or my pig is like to trample you. It takes all his concentration to keep in a straight line," she said, her voice thick and raspy with smoke.

"Excuse me," said Immacolata, always polite—and it had long ago been agreed that Hind was not to talk to strangers, as we would not want to be robbed of her by someone who fancied having a girl who dispensed endless jewels from her mouth. "But where are we? What is this place?"

The woman drew deeply on her pipe and blew green smoke at her boar. She looked up at the tea girl's scarlet ribbons, and her eyes narrowed further. "How long have you been away from Varaahasind, my little decadent?" Taglio started as if slapped. The goatskinned woman laughed and coughed and laughed again. "Don't worry—who would I tell? As for the rest, this isn't any place, silly things. By tomorrow we'll all be gone, each to our own corners of the yawning, grassy world…"

THE PIG-TAMER'S TALE

MESINYANE HAS A TUSK PIPE AND A PIG CALLED Femi, and my pipe it is a hollow tooth, and my pig he is so named, and thus you may be reasonably sure that Mesinyane tells you these things.

I am here because this is where we go, who travel and perform and live on the world but not in it. The wind blows us together, to exchange news and tricks and techniques, to whisper to each other what cities can afford us, to trade tightropes for horseshoes. The blue of my hair is paint, the shade of my eyes a cheap glamour purchased from a mixer of oils and unguents who had a green cart and great, long fingers. I am dressed up no less than my boar. We do all these things, trade and dye and dance and learn and part—it is a happy vagary of our lives. Word is passed horse to ox to magician to singer, and we wind our way, eventually, to an agreed-upon dale. This is a Vstreycha, a congress of fools, and I came to it from Varaahasind, where I was born in the house of my father, who was also a fool, but the kind who lets the milk curdle in its pail and the beer lose its head to the breeze, not the professional kind.

When I was grown, and our hut of pigskins was low and warm in the jungles outside the city—we were too poor to live on the terraces, near the palace with its perfumed queens! I often used to dream of catching a glimpse of one of those women, strange and exotic as chained leopards. But we lived on the outskirts, where the banana leaves cast green shadows, and my father Femi slept behind the stove.

This is not so odd—certainly it was warm as a held breath in our forest, but it is a pleasant thing to sleep on the bricks behind the stove, warmed as they are by the bread baking against the side of the iron, and sweat away bad dreams and the occasional cough. I often wished to sleep there, but my father held his post like the last soldier on a hill.

"Father," I would say, "go to the well and get us some water so that I can make us fish stew."

My father Femi would roll over on his bricks. "Why must you pester me so, Mesinyane? What did I have a daughter for? Get it yourself."

And so I would go and pull the water from the well with buckets of baobab wood, and the stew would be sweet anyhow, with green onions and pink tails floating in it.

"Father," I would say, "go and cut us some camphor wood, so that I may build up the fire and warm your bricks, so that the hut may smell of cinnamon, not yesterday's fish stew."

My father Femi would roll over on his bricks. "Why must you pester me so, Mesinyane? What did I have a daughter for? Cut it yourself."

And so I would go and cut the camphor wood and bring it in to dry, and the hut would smell of thick and spicy things, and the bricks would warm beneath my father's back.

"Father," I would say, "go to the market and fetch us two black roosters so that I may roast them up for us, and stuff your pillows with the feathers."

And my father Femi would roll over on his bricks. "Why must you pester me so, Mesinyane? What did I have a daughter for? Get it yourself."

And so I went into the jungle, where the banana leaves are high and their fruit not yet ripe, where the cacao flowers are wet and pale. I was muddy to my knees by the time the road smoothed out through the coffee plants wavering white and green and red. My arms burned with shoving the forest aside to let me pass, and my face was full of the pricks of mosquitoes. But I could see the first rounded terrace tops, and my mouth watered for the chickens to come.

But my legs are small, and by the time I found a little butcher's shop with cockerels hanging in the window, all was dark and every door shut against me. My feet were torn and bloody, my shoes worn through to nothing, sweat clinging my hair to my scalp as though I had slept all the day on my father's

stove. I looked up and down the narrow street, full of clothes shops where I could afford nothing and bakeries already puffing the smoke of tomorrow's bread through their roofs. The palace hunched in the distance, and the high wooded hills hid the moon from me. There was nowhere I could see that would open its doors to a goat-furred urchin, so, with rather fewer sniffles than you might expect, I settled down against the brick wall of the butcher's shop to await the old red sun's return.

I could not really sleep, but fitful dreams ran over my eyelids, leaving their tiny footprints. Sometime after the moon had finally grunted and sweated and hoisted herself up over the treetops, I saw through slitted eyes a figure walking from the palace toward me: a man who was white all over, the white of milk or cheese or chalk, and he wore very little, his long, muscled legs showing bare, his chest slung with a barbed harpoon and nothing more. His hair was long and straight, and in his arms he held a woman, stiff and dead, her beautiful limbs frozen and unmoving, crystalline snakes wrapping her arms, her skin clear as the glass of a poultry-seller's store. I had never seen anything so radiant and lovely as those two, and I think the man looked at me as he passed, but I cannot be sure. He cast a flitting light against the alley walls, shadows spitting angrily at the stone.

I could not help it—I was curious as a mouse who has not heard that someone, somewhere, has thought of a thing called a trap. I followed them, creeping close behind. I followed them all through the night, in which they floated over the ground like the moonlight that so rarely penetrated the banana canopy, and into the day, in which they still gleamed, as though their skin was hungry for light, always light. I followed them through the cacao flowers wet and pale and the coffee plants wavering white and green and red, I followed them through the baobabs with their roots like elephant trunks, I followed them past my own house.

Now, I loved my father as best I could, and I did not think he would want to miss such a thing passing by our very own door. So I rushed in and shook him awake on his stove.

"Father!" I cried. "There are Stars stamping flat the banana leaves outside our door! Come and see!"

My father Femi rolled over on his bricks.

"Why must you pester me so, Mesinyane? Did I have a daughter only to nag me and pelt me with lies? Go see yourself if you like, but leave me alone!"

"Father, I do not lie! Come and peek out of the door, just peek, and if there is no pale figure striding by you may lie on your stove all day and night and I will say nothing about it!"

My father grunted and slowly rolled back and forth, working himself up to standing. He stumbled off of his stove and went to the door, placing his eye to the jamb—and indeed, a slim, cream-blanched ankle was disappearing beyond a clutch of palm fronds. My father's face contorted like an acrobat's leg—as if in a daze he wandered out of the house and after the creatures. I knew that he was not so thick as to be unmoved by our little plot of land alight with gods! The two of us, small and quiet, followed them through the night and into day.

But it was difficult to keep up. Sleeping on a stove does not really prepare a man for marathons through high brush.

"I'm thirsty!" whined my father Femi. "What did I have a daughter for! Fetch me some water!"

"There is no clean water to be had, Father. Be patient, and perhaps we will pass a stream."

"But there is rain pooled in the leopard tracks here!" he said, pointing at some broad, deep pawprints.

"It is not safe, Father Femi. Remember what your wife, my mother said: 'Drink from the feet of a beast and win those feet for your own.'"

After a long while, as the jungle became thinner, and the mud turned to pebbles underfoot, and still we only saw the burnt leaves and steaming mist of their passing, my father Femi cried again:

"I am thirsty! Find me some water, girl! What did I have a daughter for?"

"There is no clean water to be had, Father. Be patient, and perhaps we will come to a lake."

"But there is rain pooled in the tiger tracks right here!" he said, pointing at more deep, broad pawprints.

"Remember what your wife, my mother said: 'Drink from a footprint and it will not go well with your own scraggle-toes!'"

"Your mother is off whoring herself to the Raja," my father snapped, "eating sugar pies and lamb fat and sleeping in silk every night!" His face was red as a

boil. Tears leaped to my eyes.

"She didn't want to go! The procurers came and you wouldn't beat them back with your fists or your club or your bricks, you only slept on your stove and refused to budge! 'What did we have a daughter for?' you said. 'You get her back, if you want her so much,' you said!"

We walked after the Stars in sullen silence after that. High red berries glittered, and I was thirsty, too, but I obeyed my mother. Finally, my father wailed, a long, wretched sound.

"I am so thirsty the sides of my throat stick together!" he moaned. "There is water in the boar-prints—let me drink, cruel Mesinyane!"

I turned to him and planted my hands on my tiny hips. My face was flushed and sweat-stung, my arms itchy from biting vermin, my feet a bloody ache. We were losing their scent, even as he dawdled. "Fine!" I cried. "Drink from the hoofprints, Father, drink your fill, if you will just be quiet and do as you're told!"

Happily, my father Femi set to scooping the coppery water from the deep pig-prints. "Perhaps, when we catch them, the Stars will give me a new stove, with smooth bricks which do not leave marks on my back," he chortled. I crossed my arms over my chest and waited for him to finish.

As I watched him gulp down the rainwater, mud trickled down his chin, and before it could drip back again onto the churned earth, my father Femi's chin was considerably hairier and broader than it had been before. The filthy water frothed suddenly between two yellow tusks, his thick hair twisted into a forelock, his eyes grown tiny and beady. Before my eyes my father twisted and grew until he was a great, huge, lumbering boar, and though I didn't mean to, I laughed at him squealing in the forest, still thirsty even after all his slurping.





THE MANTICORE'S TALE, CONTINUED

"AND HERE HE IS, THE OLD BEAST, WITH NO stove at all anymore!" laughed the pig-tamer; and gave her boar a little slap on the rump. He moaned, and through his snorting he seemed to say:

"Why must you pester me so, Mesinyane?"

The blue-haired woman grinned at us. "We lost their trail—I have an idea where they were going, but a Star lost stays lost. I decided to make the best of it, and worked out this little act, which keeps me out of huts with stoves and in thick shoes. But I had to dress him up in ribbons and hats—folk don't believe it's a tamed beast if it doesn't have the right costume. All tamed things are made a bit ridiculous in the process, you know."

Immacolata was ashen, twisting her red ribbons with a shaking hand. "It was Zmeya, wasn't it? She's dead, somehow, she's dead!"

"That's the story we tell—and you'll find that story told quite a bit in the Vstreycha. After she ate up her wicked husband Indrajit, the kingdom fell into the hands of the harem, who knew best what goes on in the palace, and through a complicated chain of ears, what goes on everywhere. The old perfumed queens run things in the city of pigs these days. They make sure the tale spreads far and wide, of what wronged wives may wreak. It was bad there for a while though," she mused, "while they made their way to the throne. There was a terrible spate of poisonings. Some of us here do poison from time to time, if work is hard. I've heard such things from them—they love to see Father Femi and his pretty bows. Maybe one day we'll trudge back to the

jungle and let Mother see what became of you, eh?" She prodded the great pig and he moaned again.

"Where do you think they were going?" whispered Immacolata.

Mesinyane shrugged. "Fools are a keen old pack of crows. There is a fool for every scrap of knowledge in the world, I'd bet, and they talk to each other. I think they went to the Isle of the Dead; I think he went to bury her, to do as much as one Star does for another in the way of funeral rites."

I thought I saw tears in the odalisque's dark eyes, but I could not imagine why. She had known the woman for a moment, and so what if she was a Star? The Sun was my father, and he never slept on a stove.

"Can I offer you supper?" said the gold-eyed pygmy cheerfully. "I have a nice rasher of bacon back in my tent." She grinned, and her teeth were small, small and sharp.

Once Mesinyane had filled us with bacon and rhyming songs about the laziness of pigs and men, we wandered alone through the Vstreycha. Taglio and Immacolata learned many new tricks with their cards and silks, and they purchased a ramshackle cart with a particularly moving rendition of "The Rape of Amberabad," which we shall perform for you, if you like. It was a favorite of Hind's and of mine, especially the part when the red ship sails up the harbor—which we made with fluttering blue gauze—and the three-breasted captain cuts the palace into amber coins for her hold. They bought this broken cart and Taglio painted it blue to match my eyes, and Immacolata fixed its silver stars in their firmament. Finally, we found an amber-seller in a tall black hat with a long golden feather flopping on its side, and Hind asked eagerly for news of home, of her frog-spitting sister, of her father with his silly lessons. I told her she should not care, but she only smiled sheepishly and pressed the bearded fellow for gossip.

I told her to let it lie, I told her, but she could not. Do I go whining back to the desert when an Upas dries up her sap and lies down by the water? No, I do not. But she could not let those who did not love her nearly so well as I lie still behind her as they ought. And so she heard from this man in his ridiculous hat

that her father had died, and the Bell of Amberabad chimed in mourning, day and night.

Hind twisted her black beads. She looked at me, stricken, and buried her head in my mane. I pressed my broken jaw to her face, and her tears were hot as Upas milk.

"It is all right, my girl," I whispered into her hair. "They are gone now and you are free of them. I will sing for you at any window you indicate with the smallest of your fingers, and we will be happy. There are many ways of being happy. We will find ours."

Hind looked up at me miserably, scarlet strands of my hair clinging to her face. "No, Grotteschi. I must go home. I will not be forever the wicked sister. I must do as much as any woman does for her father, for her sister."

I crouched down in the small mound of pearls that had spilled out over her toes, my paws dark against them, and made my voice soft as fingers stroking old drumskins. "I will never go back to that place. My jaw aches when I think of it—I will never touch amber again with these paws." Hind wept silently. I could not look at her. "Are you leaving me?" I growled.

She flung her arms around me, and her beads were hard on my cheeks. "Find me in Ajanabh," she whispered, pearls streaming over my shoulders like tears. "I will go there, when all things which should be in the ground are buried. I will go there, and you will find me, and sing at my window, and I will come out to you."

When the first silver streaks of dawn began to stream across the valley, she was gone, and so was the Vstreycha. A few tent spikes remained, a few pearls rolling loose and dirty. Taglio might have consoled me, and I went padding about the wreckage of the makeshift camp to find him, to find his boot-black hooves and his smiling face, which was dear to me, if not quite so dear as a wicked sister and her loud laughter.

Immacolata and her Gaselli were down in the depths of the vale, by a freezing stream which gurgled blue and frothy through the tall weeds.

"I am going," said the odalisque quietly. I don't think I ever heard her raise her voice, in all the time we walked paw by foot. She was calm as tea in a cup.

"She knows you care for her; you do not need to do more," said the eunuch, his head low.

"I will repay her gift to us. I have heard the story from three fools and a tragedian of her death, of how she killed the King, and how her brother carried her body off from the palace. Where did he take her? What can she have in that cold, dark place where Stars go? I will not let her languish—she did not let me!" Finally Immacolata's voice did break, and she struck her fists against the chest of her ersatz lover. "What did you give to the Star?" she wept. "I will give her no more than a little leaf. What did you give? What did you give?" She ripped her scarlet ribbons from her braid, long strands of hair coming with them, her tears terrible, like water boiling to a white scrim on the bottom of an old pot. "I am not like you! I don't care about religion. She saved me, she saved me when you only watched and guarded the door. She said we were sisters! How can I let her go into the dark alone? I cannot abide a sister's suffering!"

"I am sure she has enough of wild followers and grief-stricken siblings."

"She saw the leaf in me. She knew this day would come. Drink my tea and you will know what I dream of. Wear my shoes and you will know what I dream of. I dream of my sister, alone, weeping!"

He held her then, stroked her torn hair. I could not hear what he said against her skin, but I saw the sharp gleam of blood again, and I saw him dry her tears. She stood back from him, an old, familiar smile on her face.

"I have one last thing for you, who has as much of my blood in him as his own."

"I do not want anything else. I only want you to stay."

She tried to laugh, but it came out poorly, a broken cello string. "Please, my love, don't. She needs me." The odalisque shook her hair back. "I am made of tea, remember? It will be as though I simply steep, in endless water. And because of that, I can do a thing which would amaze anyone in the Vstreycha. Come close, my dear gazelle, and jump through my ear."

"What? Don't be ridiculous!" Taglio recoiled. She only laughed.

"I am only tea—can you not leap through a tea bush? So you may leap through me and come out the other side." She went to him, put her hands on his face, kissed his eyelids. "Taglio, dearest shepherd, dearest sheep, in this way you may enter me, and it will be as though we neither of us have lost anything in our lives."



He pressed his head into her, and I could hear his sobs, the sound of them like planks of wood splintering under a bronze ax. But he drew back, and to my never-ceasing surprise, took a running start, and leapt into the ear of Immacolata.

THE TALE OF THE TWELVE COINS, CONTINUED

"He came out of her clothed all in green, as he was before the harem, as the Gaselli always were. His buckles shone brilliant, his cap was soft as a mule's nose. But he looks at the green now and sees no pretty dell and unguarded campfire. He sees her leaves. Mourning clothes, he calls them, the green of young tea plants. He has never taken off the clothes of her body, and in this way, I think, he dwells within her always.

"They waded into the stream together, then, hand in hand; waist-deep in the rushing, icy water, Immacolata turned to her eunuch and smiled, tears spilling down her cheeks like cream onto a rich table. She reached up, behind his ear, and with a little flourish, produced a shimmering silver leaf out of the air.

"'You must find the Isle of the Dead, and take this seed of me to her. I know you will do this for me; I know it as well as I know the lines of my palm and the hairs of my head. Go into the world, and take me out of it. This is my heart—carry it with you. I will dream of you in the dark, and you will taste it in my tea, and feel it in my shoes.'

"With that, Immacolata dissolved slowly into the water, like sugar. She drifted apart, each brown leaf wafting slowly onto the stream. The current held her for a moment, a great circle of leaves with green-clad Taglio in the center, and then carried them off and away."

Oubliette and I gawked at the Manticore, our mouths hanging open as though we had gone simple. And as we sat curled in her tail, the great red beast closed her sparkling eyes and began to sing, low and soft, like a wooden flute

and a diamond trumpet playing together. She did not lie about her songs—we wept openly under the strokes of her voice, the lost, sorrow-bound notes moving against us like hands, telling us how beautiful Immacolata was as she drifted downstream, and how it pierced Grotteschi to hear Taglio keen and scream as he did on that lonely bank.

Finally, she closed her misshapen jaw, and we came slowly to ourselves. "We had both been abandoned by our best-loved beasts. It seemed right to carry out their wishes together, and we went first after the Isle of the Dead."

"Did you find it?" I said, breathless.

"No," she said shortly. "And it is my turn now. We are going to Ajanabh and I will sing for my girl at every window until she comes to one, her black beads tumbling out, and calls me up to her."

The great beast glared defiantly at us, setting her jaw as best she could, daring us to mock her. We nestled in quickly against her, and there were no more stories that night. After a time, all of us slept, even her, her scarlet fur buffeted by snores.

I woke in that awful cold that seeps in sometime between midnight and dawn, as if the sky had frozen, and its black edges crept into your clothes through every seam. Even in the cart with its warm curtains I shivered, and turned to Oubliette for warmth as we always had—but she was gone, an empty space in the coil of Grotteschi's tail where she had been. My stomach seized—in all those years I had never woken to an empty bed, she had never been anything but there and heavy and warm in the night. *Don't leave me, don't leave me,* went the refrain of our life together.

Carefully I moved the coils of the Manticore's tail from my legs, gingerly lifting the beetle green shell of its scorpion tip from the door frame, and crept outside, into a cold that stung my face like birch branches. Taglio rested next to the long blue bars of the cart, his green clothes clung with dew, ice stuck to the bottom of his boot-black hooves. Oubliette lay asleep, curled against him like a cat, her face clouded with dreams but not frightened—I do know the look of fear on her face, I know it so well. I wanted to go to her and sleep against her as I used to, to tuck my head into her shoulder and breathe together, to hold her between me and the dark. But perhaps she was not

entirely mine any longer, perhaps she had not snuck out of the cart on a whim, and I should not disturb her.



I crawled under the cart handles and drew myself up next to Oubliette anyway, her familiar body, her familiar smell. Taglio stirred, and extended his long, slender arm over both of us.

"I couldn't find it," he sighed. "That's what you want to know, isn't it? How I could stop looking, how I could let her go. I tried so hard, but the paths that go to the Isle are hidden and dark and I could not find them. I am a shepherd, I know only well-tilled fields and plots of earth where folk have lived back and back and back to their greatest grandparents. I couldn't find it, and Grotteschi deserves her chance, too. Someday I will start the search again. Perhaps in Ajanabh, there is a mapmaker who knows the way, or a poet who has heard of how it is done."

Gently, so as not to wake Oubliette, he pulled a small box from his jerkin, an intricate box of tea wood, with a sweet green shoe carved on its lid and inlaid with beryl. He opened it, and there inside lay a silver leaf, glimmering dark and pale.

"But I keep her with me, always and always," he said, and closed the lid again.

And so we traveled together, ever wending toward Ajanabh, which proved to be farther than I could have imagined the ghost city could carry us. I had never dreamed the world so wide. We walked, we rode, we performed to keep bread in our bellies, lacking anyone capable of spitting out pearls for our daily use, and Taglio caught the occasional gamey rabbit. Oubliette went with him to hunt, and she became a wild thing, rarely speaking, growing lean and tall, her movements sudden and sharp.

In our little show, she danced.

There was a red curtain in the cart, and when there were more than a few villagers with pennies clutched in their turnip-pulling hands, we strung it up high, and pulled Grotteschi's tail through it, slung with a thin green sock to hide the barb. She shuddered when we pulled the cloth over her, every time,

but she did not protest—it was our best act. We had others: Grotteschi often sang, and as she sang she turned her face to the sky and wept, and this never failed to fill our baskets with food and money, for the Manticore's song seemed to grip folk by the wrist and empty their pockets by force. Taglio danced—but he often frightened folk, who knew how the dances of the Gaselli usually ended. More often, he tied a ribbon to his Manticore, and terrified them with his tamed monster. More often than not, Grotteschi devoured the ribbon in disgust afterward, and we were always short of them. But Oubliette's dance was the best thing we knew how to do.

With her sock in place Grotteschi's tail was a very convincing snake, and she and Oubliette performed a strange and sinuous dance while Taglio played his pipes or his fiddle of almond wood. As the years went on and the road grew little shorter, I learned to play his fiddle, and we accompanied the beast-dance together. It was always an alien, affecting thing, when Oubliette danced. Though she wore a long dress, some villages called it obscene—but it was only that she danced so desperately, faster and faster each time, and never twice the same. She danced as though she could dance her way out of the sod tower, and the golden ball, and the ghost city, and the hedgehog's love.

What she danced, while Grotteschi writhed her tail in undulating patterns, flicking it and swelling it and coiling it in lazy circles, was a story we learned in the Vstreycha, a story we never found unknown in any hamlet or within any burgher's wall, of a woman who was also a snake, who was also a Star, and how her husband betrayed her, and how she took her revenge. By the final notes, Oubliette would be concealed behind the curtain, and only the great green tail remained.

My friend grew obsessed with this story, with her dance. She hardly spoke to anyone anymore, though at night she still could not sleep alone, and clung to Taglio or me or even the furry flank of the red lion. Once, when she was strapping knives to her calves in order to hunt deer, I tried to kiss her—just once, just to see if I could. She recoiled and looked at me with bruised black eyes.

"Why?" she said, her voice long and deep now, a grown woman, finally. "Why would you do that?"

"I don't know," I said, and it was true.

She brought back a fawn that night. Its spots were white and eerie in the moonlight. In the morning, she was gone, and Taglio's little box was empty.

THE TALE OF THE CROSSING, CONTINUED

"I FOLLOWED HER. I HAVE ALWAYS FOLLOWED her. She is there, on that island, I know she is, and I am going to save her. We save each other; it's what we have always done. I was made to save her; she was made to save me."

Idyll frowned into the sky, black and boiling with the oncoming storm. "How did you spend the last three coins?"

"Why do you care? Isn't it enough that you have one of them?"

"Call it an interest in numismatics." The old man chuckled.

Seven covered his eyes with his rough, knuckle-split hand. He forced back tears, though his throat threatened to strangle his words. He could not make his voice steady; it was ragged and broken, the sound swallowed up by the great glassy lake and the rumbling sky. "I spent them to get here! I spent them to find her! I spent them to get farmers and astrologers and idle princes and dairywomen to tell me where she had gone, mapmakers and poets and river pilots and necromancers to tell me how to follow after her. I spent them to get her back—what else are they good for? What else could they buy? I spent them to buy her back, I spent them to cross the lake, I spent them and they're gone and all I have is an empty sleeve." He broke into fog-softened sobs and the old ferryman might have comforted him, indeed leaned forward to do so, had not a thin, reedy wind blown by, a wind like the last gasp of a man frozen to death on a barren snowfield. The wind blew aside Idyll's shabby brown cloak, and Seven saw what was beneath it—he meant to scream, or cry out, but all that his lungs could manage was a groan and a slack jaw.



Idyll's skin ended at the base of his throat. The rest of him was all bones, great, long, yellow bones, and his skeleton was more than a man's, for the thin fringe-frames of huge wings arched up from his spine, the substance of his senescent hunch. He had fleshy hands, and feet, wrinkled skin sagging and dry, but beneath the cloth he was as naked as it is possible for a man to be, and through the gaps in his bones, Seven could see the choppy silver waters of the lake.

Through those same spaces ran two black lizards, chasing each other up and down his barrel–rib cage like squirrels around an oak tree. They chattered and hissed as they passed, flicking their tongues at his clavicle, his pelvis. Their eyes were white, like the eyes of blind men, and once in a while, one would pause briefly, as though he had found a walnut, and gnaw on one of the ferryman's vertebra.

Idyll looked chagrined. He pulled his robe back over the racing lizards. "It's not so bad, really. I've gotten used to them. But I suppose that they require an explanation as surely as a bone coin…"

THE FERRYMAN'S TALE

THERE ARE SOME WHO SAY THE MOON IS DEAD, that only the dead trace their lineage there. They are wrong, and if you would believe the scripture of such creatures, you would surely believe anything.

The Moon is ever fertile. She cannot turn to look at herself in the ocean's mirror but that a peony with crystal edges blooms from her navel. When she speaks, oysters fall from her mouth, oysters and tadpoles with wiggling tails. In the dark of the world before there were eyes to open and call it black, she was whole, and perfect, and did not change her shape through the month. But in the dark as in anything else, there were drifting winds and currents, and these blew gently against the ribs and shoulders of Moon, causing her to slowly spin in the sky, her arms outstretched as a child will do when she floats upon a clear and blue-green inland sea, letting the little kissing waves push against her body.

When the Stars left the sky—folk do not lie on that score, at least—their going left sucking holes in the dark, and winds issued from them as from a burst balloon. Poor Moon was battered on all sides by these whistling winds, and she began to spin faster and faster. As she spun in the sky like a dervish, the winds were so fierce that they began to peel off slivers of her flesh, pale and translucent and shimmering. These slivers drifted dreaming to earth, feather-slow and fragile as petals.

Finally, Moon had nothing left for the empty sky to peel away. The little black core of her rested at last in a lightless hollow, no bigger or brighter than



a speck of soot. But as all things will do when they are allowed some respite, Moon began to grow again, for she cannot help her fecundity. She turned this way and that, and peonies bloomed from her navel, chrysanthemums exploded from her palms. Oysters and tadpoles fell out of her mouth. Pine boughs snaked around her waist. In her hair saplings writhed and danced in blind ecstasy. It was not long before Moon was full and vast again, as she had been. But the Star-sparse sky had become like a river flowing between a few sharp rocks, the currents more fierce than they had ever been, and no sooner was she round and bright but they began to peel off her flesh again.

And so the Moon waxes and wanes, from a swell of light to a speck of soot. Poor, lost little Moon, who gets only the briefest moments of respite. We are sorry for her, we feathers, we petals, we sloughed-off children. Moon skins the Hsien are, cast away like plum skins. We are the drifting shells the black winds blow from her, silver-dim as the shadow cast by a foxglove at moonrise, clear and hard as frozen glass.

Once we waged a holy war against the rotting heretics who cling to a false Moon, but they do not mourn for their dead as we do. Attrition is a terrible thing when you must bear it alone. Long ago we gave in—if they wish to amuse themselves with morbid fairy tales, we will not spoil their games. We persevere, knowing the truth, even in the face of their perversion.

I am sure that I have given the impression of maleness to you—it seems to suit the work. But we are not male, and neither female. The petals of the Moon have no sex, no children, no marriage. More of us drop each month from her flesh, and if they survive, like turtles sent across the sand into the welcoming sea, then we are replenished. We are not equipped for children; we are tiny moons, and moons do not couple, do not increase the number of aggregate moons. Neither do we eat the five cereals as men do, but suckle wind and

drink dew. We age slowly as stones, and it is difficult for us to die, though it does happen, as it is possible to smash a quartz-riddled rock.

Thus it is that I am old enough to be able to tell you that I raised the Rose Dome of Shadukiam over the diamond turrets of the city in the days before it withered into Marrow. I was an architect then, and I was sought out by the city fathers to cap their walls with flowers, flowers which would not fade, nor wilt, nor fall. It was thought by some that a walking sliver of the Moon would know something about permanence. I was promised a wine vat filled with opals and silver as payment—they were always decadent, nothing has truly changed.

In those days Shadukiam was a spiky forest of scaffolding. They were still cutting slabs of earth away to plant buildings like saplings in the wet black soil—how the city of metal and merchants began obsessed with growing things! The diamond turrets were only lately erected, their facets still tapped and chiseled by workmen with no fear of heights. The roads were tamped with feet, not rolling stones of gold and silver. The Asaad was canopied in wool. How we match, you and I! I remember the city before it was Marrow; you remember it after. This is history before history, boy, and I was there.

I instructed some few of my siblings to make their nests on the sparkling turrets or the platforms below them and await me, while I flew into the world to seek out an imperishable rose.

In the Garden

THE GIRL HAD WATCHED THE BOY DISAPPEAR INTO THE PALACE LIKE a bee buzzing into the mouth of an alligator. She had followed as close as she might, wanting to extend—just a little longer!—the time in which she was not alone, not cold, not silent. While he went into that shadowy, many-towered place, that place she would never go, the girl paced out the square that was to hold Dinarzad and her husband with her little feet. The scaffolding was half up, the chestnuts bent forward and around, their bare stick-limbs thatched and wired with gold to make a canopy thick enough to shield Dinarzad's veiled head from the eye of heaven. The girl wondered what the eye of heaven might see through so many branches and layers of silk. The sun was not quite up, but she and the boy had either become much better at their little game, or Dinarzad had become much less vigilant. Her friend was safe in his warm bed, she was sure, piled with fox fur and wool. Perhaps the dew wet his hair at the brow, perhaps not.

The peacocks wandered around the Garden, their green-violet tails dragging in the flower beds, their blue heads popping up behind clusters of late-fruiting berries. The girl and the peacocks had always been wary of each other—they did not know how to sing, and she did not know how to affect an ostentatious display. Peacocks are not entirely wild, and she was not entirely tame. But on this day of all days, she made peace, and tightened her throat enough to make a squeaking peahen's cry. A cobalt bird ventured out from its briar, and after nipping her fingers once or twice nestled its head in her hands.

She longed for the lake, but she longed more for her birds, her geese, the untamed ones that dipped into the Garden for flowers and glittering insects and then went on when the winter came. The long emerald feathers brushed her cheeks as the creature gesticulated, and she laughed, low and piping, an owl's evening cry.

"Is there anything that does not do as you say?" came a voice behind her.

The boy emerged from the chestnut chapel, and the peacock started, hissed in his direction, and huffed off, its tail held in high indignation.

"Many things. Gardeners, sisters, Sultans."

"Well, you have yet to learn their mating cries. I'm sure you'll get it eventually."

The girl grinned sidelong. "You should be in bed. You will get us in trouble again."

"There is another banquet today, for my sister's new family, her suitor's mother and father and thirty-seven brothers and sisters, if you can believe it. I haven't even tried to count the cousins." He gave a short, sharp laugh, like a bow twanging. "They killed a giraffe! I had never even seen one, but they brought the spotted thing in through the back gate, so that they can all feast on the neck. Do you think a neck will taste good? I'll try to bring you some, if you like. But truly, no one will care if I've run off again—they're used to it by now, and she can hardly throw a fit in front of her new relations. They'll be dancing and eating until their feet or their tongues wear through—one or the other."

The girl began her pacing again, wiping her peacock-warm hands on her skirt.

"Would you tell me a tale in the daytime?" the boy said shyly. "Does it not seem strange even to ask, to talk by first light instead of last?"

"Is there anything that does not do as you say?" the girl asked archly. He blushed.

"You know my cry. I do not know yours," he mumbled, not meeting her gaze.

A thin kind of sunlight, not so very different from moonlight, seeped through the clouds as through a cheesecloth, tipped the trees in wet light, and slanted down the edge of the girl's long, straight nose. Her hands were cold with morning, the Garden paths damp and shivering. She drew him away from

the newborn shadows cast by the chestnut chapel, and into a thorny, bloomless bramble, not unlike the first one they had shared, save that this was bare and brown, the thorns overhead dripping dew. The boy settled himself with sure habit, and reached for her hands to warm them as he would have with one of his younger siblings. She let him rub the skin of her fingers until they tingled red and hot, and began again.

"'It seemed obvious to me that you could not raise a rose that did not know deep in its stem and roots how to wilt and die,' the ferryman said. 'But, I reasoned, you might freeze one in its blooming…'"

THE FERRYMAN'S TALE, CONTINUED

THERE ARE MOUNTAIN PEAKS WHICH NO POOR, earthbound creature can see. Clouds hang from them like prayer flags, veil them and shroud them, and we would not see them either, if the sky were not for us a road, and if we could not see that the road keeps going past what you would call the summit, peak, tip. To these hidden places I flew, extending moon-blown wings as far as I might. Their tips frosted, their shadows on the snow were fitful and pale. From my chest hung a long leather strap, which held a sackful of what would pass as money on the ceiling of the world. I was so close to the sky I could smell its sweat, and if the Moon, our poor, besieged mother, had not been resting in her coal-dark core, I would have—would I?—been able to touch her as she spun.

In time, I came to a peak beyond which the road does not extend. I do not say that there is no higher crag, but it is the summit of the Hsien, as those rocks far below were the summit of men. Perhaps some other thing laughs at my peak, calling it but a valley, a respite from heights. I do not know; it is not my place to know. I flew as high as I was able, and my wings burned with the effort. I walked in the snow shoals ringed by sharp stones, ringed by crags like the prongs of a crown. The peak of a mountain takes many shapes, and this one was as a circle of land with granite teeth all along the edge, cut with many frozen rivers and ponds, which had once flowed with water

when the mountain-table was lower, in the history before history before history.



Along these old, hard rivers were tiny houses all of glass, or ice, or both—I suspected that they had once been made of glass, and broken in the harsh winds of the country, but froze again so quickly that no one noticed the shattering. Perhaps this had happened so many times that there was nothing left of them but shatter, held together by surprised gasps of ice. To these houses I shuffled in snowshoes made of wicker and my own feathers. When I reached the center of the town, I sat myself down in the snow and waited, my wings twitching in the drifts, drawing quick, lively patterns in the white. I was prepared to wait a good while, but hardly a week had passed before the shattered door of one of the houses cracked open and a small, green thing shambled out to me.



I had come to the kingdom of the Kappas, and one of those reluctant, recalcitrant creatures was even then shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot before me. She was very much like an upright turtle, though even upright she no more than passed my knees. Her shell was green as a girl's eyes, her limbs mottled as moss, leathery and lithe. Her hands and feet, between which there was little enough difference, were large and webbed, like a duck's, but her wrists and ankles were thick, knotted with muscle. She had a few thick yellow teeth in her face, which contorted into something of a beak under a fringe of brown hair cut like a monk's tonsure. It fell flat and frosty across her forehead, and bald in the center, where the turtle-girl had no skin, but a deep hollow in her skull, which was filled with still blue water—save that considering the snow and wind, it had frozen solid and now shimmered silver and safe in the bones of its owner.

"I am Yoi-who-was-born-in-the-evening," she said, her gravelly voice like feet scraping the bottom of a lake.

"And I am Idyll, who was born, well, at night, I suppose. I have come to beg a treasure from you, but I have not come without barter." I opened my sack at last, the heavy old thing, and drew out a handful of green fruits, long and glossy. Yoi sniffed at them and her black eyes widened.

"Cucumber," she whispered.



"You are very wise, Yoi-who-was-born-in-the-evening. I have culled cucumbers for you from the world over, slicers and picklers, yellow and green and white as a ghost's nightclothes, sandwich quality and rough, hardy breeds good enough to be boiled in stew. Gherkins the size of your thumb and rare hybrids, tiny as peas. There is even a southern varietal whose blossoms are red as a heart, and the meat of the fruit blushes orange."

The Kappa's mouth watered, though her saliva froze at the corners of her lips.

"And what is it you wish to trade for?" she asked.

"A rose which will live forever, and never fade or wilt or drop petal."

"Does it seem to you, Idyll-who-supposes-he-was-born-at-night, that roses bloom in this place?"



"Are not the Kappa great tenders of plants? Are your reputations undeserved? Surely in your shattered houses there are many wonders, or the world is much deceived."

The little turtle sighed. "It is possible that we still possess what you desire, the rose-which-was-born-in-a-lizard. But in these times of still and cold it is rarely our habit to part with our hard-won graftings. Even cucumbers—precious, delicious cucumbers—do not grow so well here. But such is the choice we made…"

THE TALE OF THE LIZARD'S LESSON

I WAS NO ONE'S BELOVED DAUGHTER. I UNDERSTAND that in tales told off the mountain, in stories told around hearths like burning hearts, it is always a King's son or a merchant's best-taught boy who is spirited away to some black kingdom or ventures forth to find a wife or a slab of gold. But I was nobody in particular: I was born in the evening. The water was violet and so was the sky, and I hatched in a nest of unripe berries and brambles, and ran toward the water with all my brothers and sisters, praying that no kestrel or osprey or alligator would snatch us out of life just as we came into it. Many of them never felt water on their webbing.

We wallow in our pools and rivers, we Kappa. We are drawn to the water, to the deep of it and the loam. The water in our skulls calls to the waters of the world. We love our pools, their catching of star-which-is-born-in-the-water and cloud-which-is-born-in-the-reeds in the perfect mirrors of their surfaces. And should a terrible, naughty, wicked thing who was born in a house stumble into that perfect water, and splash about and churn up mud, we certainly ought never to be blamed for biting them soundly.

The pool of my birth was a little pond, greenish brown, with a few reeds sprouting like hair on its banks, and three matronly lilies which grew close together, drawing their yellowed petals around them like woolen shawls. She was not a grand pool, or a tempestuous river, splashing her way through a century of rock, just a circle of water in the dark of a wood, neither deep nor wide. But she was mine, and no kestrel had snapped me up before I sank into

her evening mire with gratitude, and I loved her. I scrabbled in her shallows to keep her free of weeds. If a farmer came to draw her waters into his bucket, I gnashed my teeth at him and narrowed my black eyes to slits. If a miller's daughter came to bathe in the deeps, I pulled her hair with my thin fingers and bit her where her spine joins her hips, and soon enough she shrieked her way home.

This is how we lived, connected, each in our pool, connected each by each, born-in-the-evening to born-in-the-morning, by rivulets of rain trickling from pond to creek to river. And we kept our water still and balanced in our skulls, for we do not like to lose it—for days after, until we are full again, we swoon and dream and are blind, while the water swells up again. Soon enough all manner of beastly things managed with their dry brains to discover this, and they made endless sport of bowing to us. We are polite, ever polite—manners are our provincial pastime and native dialect! We may bite them when they trample our homes, but how can we then refuse a bow? We are compelled to bow in return, and then I suppose it is very funny for them to watch us stumble and fall about like drunk turtles.

I taught my three lilies to give fruit. We are very good at instructing the world to bend and bow to us—it learns *such* things from us, things it would never have thought to try on its own. I brought peach plants as exempla for my lilies, and by patient tutorial coaxed sweet, small berries from them, though they were reluctant, as all old women are, to try new things. The lily-berries-who-were-born-at-noon tasted of paper and crystallized honey and dust. Because of the lesson I taught the lilies I was allowed to follow the trickling streams from pond to pond and join the grafters and seed-splicers of the Greater Kappa, who spent their days in contemplation of the infinite lessons we had yet to give, and in charting those we had already completed in illuminated catalogues. The vaulted ceilings of the Greater Kappa were whorled with leaves and vines, and if, whilst sketching a theoretical pumpkin tree and its symbiotic attendant in the margins of a treatise on the unassuming apple—always keeping one's posture pleasantly straight and one's water in one's head—a turtle was hungry, she had only to reach up and pluck a sweet, wet cucumber from the window frame and her belly would be satisfied.

With a basket of lily berries I entered those green vaults, nervous as a child on her first day of school. I was given a desk below a window of cucumber flowers so sheer I could see through to the valley outside, all a-blossom with hypotheses.



When I had been there for three years and produced only a few modest successes: the blue lime-blossom, the oolong-melon, and the lemon-macaque, I was sent into the field with Yazo-who-was-born-at-the-bottom-of-winter. We were to return in a year to teach our own variant on the humble, workaday rose. She was a year ahead of me, but considered a tragic mistake. Her first lesson, the pomegranate-ant, had seemed to promise so much, yet she had done nothing but catalogue since she arrived. Therefore she was punished by being partnered with an untried turtle, and I was cautiously prodded to work harder by being yoked to the puzzling genius who refused to work. We were decades from our greatest collaborations: the Upas-which-was-born-by-the-water, the Ixora-which-was-born-burning, and but a year, give or take, from the rose-which-was-born-in-a-lizard.

Yazo was pretty, her face an unusual yellowish green, her tonsure glossy and black—but her hair was messy, her eyes always tired. There were little holes in the webbing between her fingers, small as needle pricks, but I saw them. As we walked out from the seeded doors of the Greater Kappa, I shouldered her pack as well as my own, so as to save her the effort. We are polite, ever polite, as I have said.

"Yoi-who-was-born-in-the-evening," she said, after we had been walking in the fields for a time, following the curve of the river which flowed through the central room of the Greater Kappa and out again into the world, "do you suppose that when our water spills out, and afterwards fills up again like a basin emptied in the morning and filled at night, we are the same Kappa, the same dear turtle that we were before?"

"I do not know, Yazo-who-was-born-at-the-bottom-of-winter," I stammered. "I have never considered it."

"I have spilled out my water once a month since I entered the cucumber vaults," she said softly, dreamily, looking out over the warm water and drifting milkweed-mayflies.

"What?" I cried, aghast. "Why would you do such a thing to yourself? It's terrible, obscene!"

"Perhaps I am teaching myself a lesson," was her only answer, and we walked in a stubborn silence which would not give us up. I looked again at the holes in her webbing and her frazzled hair, her peculiar skin. I saw why the other Kappa did not like Yazo—she was ragged and strange and possibly mad. But still, I did as she said.

And what she said was that we were bound for the Kingdom of Glass Rain, a far-off prairie land whose folk had discovered a novel way of ferreting out the answers to things. In need of answers, we turned our shells to the grasslands, and I thanked the Stars each night that the journey was not so long as a month, so that I would not have to witness Yazo's scarification.

The Kingdom of Glass Rain was indeed full of wild grasses, which blew over the flats like waves rolling in with high tide. They were green and gold and their stalks were silvery gray, and the waves were very beautiful. All ringing the dell were red rocks and squat, flat-topped hillocks, streaked in pale swathes of yellow stone. It was cold; the sky was high and brittle, and the long roofs of the capital, tiled like, well, like a turtle's shell, glinted clear and sharp in the distance.

We were received, in a manner of speaking, at the gate of the local academy, which was a thick, dusty cedar door carved in a complicated pattern of interlocking lizards. I say "in a manner of speaking" because we were not at first sure that anyone at all was there, just inside the shadowy threshold, which smelled of hay and eggs and old cedar, polished by a hundred hands.

"Please," a voice said, small and gentle, like a shivering cat pawing at the kitchen window. "Who is this who wishes to enter the breeding house?"

But there was no one standing where the voice seemed to be born. Only the beginning of a long hall filled with hushed voices and the sounds of clacking claws on glass.

“I am Yoi-who-was-born-in-the-evening, and this is Yazo-who-was-born-at-the-bottom-of-winter, of the Greater Kappa, who have come to ask answers of you.” I aimed my speech where I thought it should go, but the voice sounded again, farther off to my right.

“I am sorry, I know you cannot see me, and that it is disconcerting. My name is Ostraya, and I am the Princess of Glass, and I keep this house. If you have questions, I am she who will breed the lizard who will have your answer.”

We were somewhat nonplussed by this, as you might imagine. “But where are you? Why can we hear you and yet see nothing?”

The voice laughed a little, as if at a very old and no longer particularly funny joke. I felt a weight fall on my hand, cool and hard—a hand of glass.

“The Glass Rain took me…”

THE TALE OF THE GLASS PRINCESS

IN THIS COUNTRY, WHEN WE SPEAK OF THE GLASS Rain, we do not wax poetic. It is not a quaint local figure of speech. We speak of the spring, new and green and grass-scented, which brings clouds so white and pure that they have no scent at all. The clouds crawl in and let loose their bows—and the Glass Rain comes upon us.

The drops are slivers of glass, a broken mirror falling from the sky. They pile on the grass, cutting it low, like terrible, hard snowflakes. They scream as they fall. They slash the air and catch the cloudlight, they flash and flare. For weeks after, the roads crunch and chatter beneath our feet. When the clouds come, mothers hurry their children indoors, bankers seal themselves up in vaults, cobblers barricade themselves behind row after row of iron-toed shoes. All crouch and listen as the rain clatters and shatters and shivers to pieces on the tile roofs, and falls off the eaves in a rainbow of reflected storm colors.

I was caught outside.

My mother is the Queen of Glass, and I can hardly begin to tell of her beauty. Even as a child, there were times when I could not speak for awe of her, her silver hair and silver eyes, her lashes like spun sugar, her lips so red that apples envied her. She was the breeding mistress then as I am now, and her fingers were ever bandaged, for lizards are tempestuous, willful creatures.

In this country, lizards are not plentiful. We brought them when we were nomads, so many generations ago we have given up trying to remember what land was first our home. But bring them we did, and bred them in warm



burrows where they cooed and hissed happily over clutch after clutch of eggs. Who first noticed the markings on their backs? Who can say? A woman, a man, a child? A King, a Queen, a pauper, a knave? There is a book on a golden podium in my mother's hall which says, with many pictures in costly scarlet ink, that a cook with wooden shoes once sought a novel way to cook cabbage. One evening he produced the most amazing dish for the royal banquet, towers and turrets of shaped cabbage, stuffed with raisins and goat meat, with cabbage trellises draping over cabbage rivers steamed in black wine. When the cook was asked how this extraordinary display came about, he produced his pet lizard, which had, in the markings on its back, a complex and magnificent recipe carefully filigreed in scale and spine. From that day forward, lizards were culled and read, and though not all of them had recipes written upon their backs, many had stories, and equations, and formulae, and prophetic utterances, and laws we had never heard of. The recording of the lizards' markings became the obsession of a generation.

And then it was discovered that if one bred the lizards, new and marvelous markings resulted. If the lizard which showed the method for creating a beautiful copper spoon were bred to one which showed a new technique for mining tin, eggs would hatch with fat babies carrying the instructions for beating out a bronze sword, or schematics for a water drill, or an epic poem dealing with two statues on opposite ends of a square who fell in hopeless love, one of copper and one of tin. Thus was born the Lizard-Calculus of the Glass Country.

This is what the book on the golden podium in my mother's hall says. I do not know, but it makes a very pretty story, and I was encouraged to eat cabbage each day as a child.

However it began, this is now the pastime of our aristocratic classes, the breeding of lizards, one to the other, and certainly most extraordinary things have resulted. I am not surprised you come to us for answers—what answers have we not given, when asked? Why, we have learned that it is even possible to distill food from rocks and jewels! We have bred the very algebra of government on the back of an iguana! Yet though we have bred lizards with rain hymns to those with a map of the glass molecule sketched in orange against black scales, and those with storm predictions to those with plans for a glass cathedral blazing red on green, we have never discovered a way to hold back the Glass Rain.

When I was young, my mother kept me always at her silver side, against her silver hip, in the crook of her silver arm. For her, "Queen of Glass" is only a title, or a way to talk about her wonderful features, her customary silver crinoline, her glassy, wet scent that drifts after her like pine trees dripping dew to a moist forest floor. For me, it is simply what I am.

She let me out of her sight only once, when my favorite lizard, a huge, fat fellow with a map to the Antipodes subtly drawn in brown on his dry, parchment-colored hide, broke his braided silk leash and went bounding across the grasses, his whipping tail held high. I tore after him, my mother in her glittering dress and glass parasol calling after me, calling my name across the green. But I could not let him go—he was meant to be bred to a sleek little black female with a yellow navigational chart glinting on her belly. We had high hopes, and besides, he always slept with me at night, and he would be lonely out in the cold. Soon I was quite far from my mother, though I could still hear her high, even call.

The storm came quickly that day, and none of the lizards had predicted one that season. The white clouds rolled in like horses stumbling and with a terrible crack, like a knife thrust through a mirror, the Glass Rain fell. I felt it—I must have felt it. But when I think back on it now I cannot remember any pain, I cannot remember hurt or skin slicing open or the edges of the rain meeting the edges of me. But meet they did, and thousands of slivers of glass fell screaming into my skin, piercing my shoulders, my hands, my scalp, my cheeks, my legs—ah, there it is, I remember, the legs hurt when they went—in

so many places and so quickly that I was rooted to the spot by the glass that had poured so suddenly into me, like water filling up a vase.



In fact, it was so quick, and so many slivers fell that day, that when the storm had passed, I stepped away from the prairie and onto the road again, and to my surprise, a girl of glass stepped out of the girl of skin. So much glass, so quickly! More of me was glass than flesh in that moment, and so it has been ever since.





My mother was frantic. She culled lizards from every kingdom, even fresh stock with nothing at all on their backs. Clutch after clutch of eggs were laid in the hopes of finding a cure. She sent letters to every doctor and wizard and witch, begging them to turn her daughter to flesh again. They even—I hesitate to say it!—fed some few of the breeding lizards which seemed to have glass-lore on their backs slices of my old skin, which had been gingerly carried from the field. It did not matter. I remained glass. They tried rolling me in pollen, or clouding the glass with oil and paint, or mud and grass. But I am made of rain; it all slides away.

Finally, on a day when it was so clear that roaming squirrels were blinded, a drifting snow fell on those fields, and walking with my sorrowing mother, her silver hair limp and strung with flakes, I felt my skin frost over, forking lines of frost shooting over my cheeks, my arms, my belly. My breath fogged in the air, and the sun shone through my hair just as it would through a real girl's curls.

My mother threw her arms around me and her warm fingers stuck to me, but she only laughed and wept and called me her darling. We strode through the fields, and she picked crocuses for me, and gave me honey cakes to eat. We talked of the lizards, of the Rain, of silly things which we always talked about when I was only a voice and a weight on the couch—but they seemed brighter and more important, now that she could see my frost-fringed eyes close when I laughed.

But it cannot snow all the time.

On those few days when the sun and snow join hands, my mother and I go walking in the high and brittle grass. When all the other days dawn snowless, we weep, and tend the lizards in silence, and I try to spare her the pain of

hearing my voice without seeing me. I am the ghost of her daughter, and I am sorry, I should not have run off. That silly old lizard. I should not have done it.

But in secret, I think glass is very beautiful, and I among all possible village girls may stand in the Glass Rain and look into the clouds as they weep their hard, cutting tears. They cannot hurt me anymore. And I became the breeding mistress in my mother's place, long before I ought to have inherited it—the lizards love me, and they can bite all they like. My glass fingers never feel it; their teeth leave no mark. I am good at it, better, even, than my mother, and it was I who discovered the way of rendering jewels to food, for which I was much praised.

But my poor mother, she cries out for me at night, and cannot see that I am there.

THE TALE OF THE LIZARD'S LESSON, CONTINUED

"I AM A GHOST-LIBRARIAN," THE VOICE SAID. "A shade who carries lizards to and fro, opens and closes pens, but no more. I will become a glass crone with wrinkles like prisms, but I will never be Queen. I will haunt my wretched, mourning mother and make sure the eggs are dry, and that is all."

We gawked a little, I admit. That is not very good manners, but perhaps we can be forgiven.

"What is it, then, that you wish to barter from us, Yoi-who-was-born-in-the-evening?"

I cleared my throat. "It is a matter of roses, Ostraya who-was-born-in-the-rain," I said, shyly.

"Oh! Roses are very interesting, are they not? Did you know that if you feed one nothing but sugar water and a mash of honeybees, it becomes sweet and thick enough to be fried for sandwiches, like boar meat or fish? We have lunched on rose and leek sandwiches for most of this season!"

We expressed some interest in this, and were shown the parent lizards for that recipe, one grafting process so complex there hardly seemed to be a lizard beneath the markings, one anatomical diagram of a large pike. They lolled about in their pen, proud of their children, their thick legs and flamboyant tails, and knew nothing of what was on their skins. We were shown by invisible hands all the lizards which had a thing to do with roses, and spent many months there in contemplation. Yazo was beside herself, her breath thick and fast, her water jostling in her skull. I kept away from her when she spilled

herself, and the days after when she could not remember who she was. It was too disturbing, and I did not know how to ask again how she could torture herself so.

Only once did I stumble upon her at that grisly ritual. I had a theory regarding ink and yolk production I wanted to share with her, and I admit that contrary to manners I burst into her room to find her on her knees on a white mat, with a silver bowl before her. I grimaced, and would have left her, but she turned her black eyes to me, and the green bags beneath them were so terrible and deep. I knelt at her side.

"Yazo-who-was-born-at-the-bottom-of-winter, please do not do this. It is an obscenity; I cannot bear to witness it. Do you not see your webbing? Your hair?"

"I am teaching myself a lesson, Yoi. Myself and all Kappa. Of course I see it." She brushed my tonsure fondly. "I am sorry it distresses you. But you must understand—the others think that to lose one's water is only a matter of a few days' bleary eyes and stumbling into things. It is much worse. No one will believe it, and so I show them in my skin. When I am far gone enough, they will understand that we must find a place where the water can be kept safe, and never spilt out for the amusement of a village oaf." She coughed and took my hand. "I do not even remember now how to grow the pomegranate-ant. I have done nothing of note because I cannot remember how. One day I will not remember when I was born. But that is all right. Then they will see."

I helped her. Forgive me, I helped her to bend forward into the bowl, and listened to the blue water splash in the silver, and looked into her skull when she had finished, empty and dry, the color of old weeds. I laid her in her bed, and sang to her while she slept insensate.

In only another month, while Yazo was stumbling in the dark and crying and even I could not reach her, I asked Ostraya—I had a little glass bell which let her know I wanted her—to bring me the glass lizard, which is to say the lizard which first carried on it the way of making glass, of blowing it into shapes. I held under my arm an enormous red female who would absolutely not stop licking her eyeballs. She was a rose-lizard, the very simplest one I could find. On her back was nothing more than a minutely fine, infinitely detailed image of a rose, perfect in every petal and thorn. It was red—red on

red, the rose itself a deeper and bloodier shade than her skin. Ostraya was quiet for a long while, but I could hear her breathing and knew she was not gone.

"He is an ancient fellow," she said finally. "And a miserable, hoary old monarch besides."

"If it is too much to ask in the Glass Country to see this beast, Ostraya-who-was-born-in-the-rain…"

But she brought him, in a wicker basket on his own blue pillow, a gray and green and crusty bull, his crest flopped over as though exhausted with the effort of staying upright for so many years. His eyes were milky and filmed; his throat emitted a constant rattle. But he was covered in instructions, and so I felt generous toward him.

He bit me, of course, when I placed him in the pen next to my scarlet female. Lizards are vicious.

By the time Yazo was herself again—though she looked strangely at me when I used that phrase—the red lizard was getting her nest ready and looking very pleased with herself. We waited, and waited, and ate rose and leek sandwiches and rose steaks and rose roasts and poached rose until we had to say, very politely, to be sure, that rose was no longer quite to our liking, begging the pardon of all our estimable hosts.

When we departed the wide prairie, we had passed through the warm season and into the cold again. The next Glass Rain was still weeks off, according to the latest lizards. We had in our packs a very curious young thing with coral skin and a stark black lesson snaking across his back, and even Yazo was talkative.

"It was very clever of you, Yoi-who-was-born-in-the-evening. I will tell everyone that it was you and not me who discovered it," she chirruped, skipping down the breeding house steps like a child.

We walked out of the womb-warm hall and into a clear, freezing day.









The sun streaked through heavy clouds and played chasing games with the grass. And very lightly, it began to snow. We laughed and stuck out our tongues, feeling very strange indeed to feel snowflakes falling into our skull-water. We turned back to look at the bright, tiled roof all covered in white, and saw at the door a beautiful, sad-eyed young woman, all of glass. Her hair fell in crystal rivers to her waist, and her dress was crisply cut, frosted at the elbows. Her hands were slender and tipped in blue, her cheeks jeweled and clear, a little glass mole on the side of her transparent nose. She waved us farewell, her mouth a wide, sparkling smile through which the sun blazed.

At her feet was a huge, fat lizard on a glittering leash, his glass belly rippling, crystalline and swollen, his fringe sharp enough to cut, his tongue hanging out of his mouth like a glass bookmark.

THE FERRYMAN'S TALE, CONTINUED

"Our little coral bull was a sensation in the Greater Kappa. His lesson, which became our lesson, was enough to catch the breath of all the turtles with their feet tangled in cucumbers. How to make a rose which would never die or wilt, which would lose one petal in a century, whose gloss and shine were like glass, which would last until all the glass of the world were turned back to sand."

"This is the rose I seek."

The Kappa gestured toward the glass houses. "It is there. I told you we chose this place—we chose because of Yazo, darling Yazo, Yazo-who-was-born-at-the-bottom-of-winter. By the time we had become famous, by the time the Upas and the Ixora grew tall in the thesis-fields, and the corral was full of rolling Manticore, fat and furry as kittens, and fluttering Firebirds, she had almost no skin on her. Her webbing hung from her fingers in shreds, her eyes were sunken, her hair had all fallen out. She did not know her name—but I told it to her every day. I woke her and whispered in her green ear: 'You are Yazo, who is beautiful, and was born at the bottom of winter, and my friend.' Everything I did, the great grafts and splices that made my name—I told everyone that she was the senior of us, that she was my collaborator, my indispensable partner. Her name rose with mine, even as she forgot it entirely, and nothing I said in the morning mattered. She prodded our kittens listlessly, and did not notice if they nipped her thumbs. But she did what she meant to: She proved to them the danger of losing the skull-water, that it was more than

a few days of blear and blight. She pleaded with us to move the Greater Kappa to a safe place, a place where horrid villagers would not be forever bowing to us, and laughing at our spill, where we could be sure that we would not lose ourselves as she did."

Yoi led me to the houses, whose shattering traced lines over every pane of glassy ice. Shapes moved inside, but she did not invite me to enter.

"The Greater Kappa is all around you," she said gently. "These are greenhouses. Here on the roof of the world our water freezes and does not flow out—by her we are saved, and the best minds of the Kappa are preserved against the depredations of the average vicious child."

"I am glad for you," I said, putting my hand on her little shoulder, where the rim of her shell met flesh. "Though your houses seem to be in disrepair. Perhaps I can help with that, if you give me what I need."

She snorted. "We do not need your help."

Pushing the door of one of the larger houses open, I was thrust into a world of green, green plants and green turtles, and a sea of heads glittering blue, liquid water rippling bright. Hundreds of eyes turned to me, and regarded me with calm.

"The cold took the houses, but in most cases, ice is as good as glass. Here it is warm, here we may be intimate with each other, and let our skulls thaw. Here we teach our lessons as we always have, and our catalogue grows. But we keep ourselves to ourselves, and the world comes no more begging bouquets at our door. Until you." Her expression grew grave and sad. "But the cucumbers —for some reason the cucumbers detest the climate, and they refuse to grow. We have all the blossoms we could want, but their taste is inferior to the fruit."

"I have brought you so many varieties, surely you can breed a cucumber with a heart of ice. All I ask is my rose." I kept my wings folded neatly back and stooped under the ice roof, trying to be as small and familiar as it is possible to be as a swan among turtles.

"Yes, well, you must wait," huffed Yoi. "We hardly keep mature specimens on hand for the pleasure of whatever outlandish flying thing finds its way to our doorstep. But we would enjoy the cucumbers now, of course." She grinned, finally, and her teeth were small and brown and neat, like a wooden model of a child's teeth.

I handed over my sack amiably, and the Kappa scurried forward like cats to cream, sorting those to eat from those to dissect, and chewing greedily at the unfortunate fruits which were deemed too common to breed. And as they ate, Yoi beckoned each of them away from the feast and to her, touching the water of their skulls and whispering. When the meal was done, I was sent away, told to meditate on the wonders of succeeding generations of plant life, and wait. A glass house was provided for my comfort, an empty cottage at the far corner of the village.

"Why do you have an empty house, if you do not expect visitors?" I asked as I was gently but firmly pushed toward the door by a dozen webbed hands. Yoi answered me, her face downcast.

"It is Yazo's house, who died the day we came to this mountain. We keep it in her honor, and you must treat it kindly."

It was a long while to wait. I wrapped my wings around myself in the low-raftered house of Yazo, slowly opening and closing them in imitation of the poor, lonely moon. This is the Hsien's way of meditating, and when her light shone through the shattered panes, my skin was covered in her, covered in long lines of blue like a mother's arms. I considered many things, though not often among them was the nature of succeeding generations of plant life. In my mind, lightened by the nearness of the moon, I designed the Dome of Shadukiam, shaped it petal by frame until it stood erect and perfect within me.

When it was done, Yoi came to collect me. She wore a little black cap which I took to be a sign of respect for her absent comrade in whose house I trespassed. She did not explain it. I followed her up the snow-pat street and into the greenhouse where I had first seen rippling water in the depths of her tonsure. Within were countless Kappa, all respectfully standing at attention, their hands clasped together.

In the head of each one floated a flawless rose, pink and white and red, without blemish or brown. Yoi slowly removed her cap, and beneath it, too, was a large and spotless flower, as true a scarlet as any I have seen before or since. I must have looked surprised, for she laughed, a small, musical sound like wooden drums pattered upon by rain.



"How did you think we grew things? In the soil like farmers? Every lesson I have taught, from lily-berry to Ixora, was grown first in my own head. Where else should I trust it? Take these things, Idyll-who-supposes-he-was-born-at-night, and do not let our work be forgotten in the world below."

One by one the Kappa reached into their skulls and plucked their flowers, careful not to spill a drop, and one by one they piled them into my sack, until it was brimful with roses.

"Farewell, Yoi-who-was-born-in-the-evening," I said, and as I ducked out of the glass house, I saw the smallest of cucumbers budding from the walls.



And so was finally built the Rose Dome of Shadukiam. As I had constructed it in the house of Yazo-who-was-born-at-the-bottom-of-winter, so it blossomed over the infant city, its colors reflected in the cart tracks of the mud streets. My siblings and I flew back and forth over the apex, nets full of immaculate flowers suspended from our shoulders, sewing them to the superstructure with infinite care, with a thread of diamonds and iron. And the stalks which arched so high and bore their roses with grace long enough that no one can now speak of Shadukiam without her roses? Glass, all of glass, perfect and pure as ice, perfect and pure as a young woman's face.

And once in a century, there would be a strange, soft rain as each rose lost a petal and the petals would drift to streets that were mud, then stone, then silver, not unlike a Hsien peeled off from the face of the moon.

All this completed, I went to the city fathers of Shadukiam and asked for my payment, my opals and silver. I considered briefly that I should have asked for better, but agreements are agreements, and living stones rarely break theirs.

Imagine my surprise when the Shaduki governor glowered darkly and mumbled that he could not possibly render my payment when the flowers that crowned his city were clearly no roses, but some monstrous abomination of a flower that only a specter like myself would know where to find.

"Did I not do just as you asked? Did I not find for you an imperishable rose?"

"Well—" The little man shuffled, twisting his bracelets in anxiety as I flared my wings, towering over him. "Even on this point we must disagree. They are not strictly imperishable, are they? One petal in a century, it's quite a lot of work for city sanitation on those occasions…" He sweat red and redolent under my nose.

"I have worked wonders for you," I whispered.

"Even so," said he.

"I will bring down the Dome on your heads; the shattering of the frame will be heard all the way to the sea."

"Again," said the wretched governor, his hems weighted in gold, "we must disagree."

It is difficult to subdue a Hsien. One might as well try to keep the moon still. But they gagged me and bound me and there were so many of them, so many, like ants, and the blood they drew from my scalp was white and thick, like molten bone. They bound me and dragged me up to the highest of the diamond turrets, which were clearer and sharper in those days than they have ever been since, and with so many hands they impaled me on its tapered tip. I saw the glittering edge of the turret slide through me, dripping white, shredding through my skin. I shrieked owl-shrill, but there was no help, only their laughter, which perhaps you know well enough, my boy. My siblings tried to release me, but they were kept away by volleys of arrows so thick they seemed to be flocks of ravens flinging themselves at the Hsien. For nine days I lay there bleeding on my roses, and they kept vigil, watching me die. I screamed, I cursed, and all of Shadukiam listened as though I was a great bell tolling out their hours.

I bellowed out any number of dooms, any number of hideous wishes to the alabaster ears of my mother. Maybe she could not see me, up there on the roof of a city. Does she see the grackles, the sparrows, the doves? She did not see me. But I seem to remember now, in that history before history, so long ago,

that as the ninth sun set I sobbed weakly and begged her to let that place die, too, to let it become as dead and gray as her own dry kneecaps, to let it starve, since it would feed no one but itself.

I seem to remember this, and I am sorry.

THE TALE OF THE CROSSING, CONTINUED

"WITH THAT NINTH SUN I PERISHED THERE, AND I cannot say what became of my body, no more than any man can. I came here; it is the first thing I remember, the lonely shore and the ferry. And the bones and the lizards—we are all translated on these shores, and I am sure I don't understand it, but there is a kind of poetry in metamorphosis, and if I could but see my lizards, I should be very interested to know what is written on their backs. But I was angry at first, and the little things scratched so terribly, and my journey on the lake was much farther than yours. When the storm came, I seized the pole from the ferryman in a frenzy of itching and impatience, a nice old woman with no teeth at all and two parrots' heads squawking out of her palms. I tried to steer myself, and fell into the water. I'd advise you not to try it. When I spluttered and gasped my way back onto the raft, the old woman was gone, and I have been the ferryman for all the years upon years that have piled up since in this place."

Seven blinked and chuckled a little. "That's quite a story."

Idyll shrugged. "Almost as good as yours."

A few drops of rain spattered onto his broad face. And, as is the way of storms, once the first drops had squeezed from the sky, the rest came tumbling after, and soon the pair was drenched.

"This is your storm?" Seven asked shakily, trying not to think of the creatures scurrying beneath that pitiful scrap of cloth. But the ferryman shook his head.



"Best let me shelter you, boy. We aren't going to make it across before they come through."

Idyll held out his arms, and shuddering, Seven fell into the embrace, his teeth chattering as bone arms and flesh hands wrapped him, as the cloak stuck to his skin like wet grass, as two ponderous wing-frames, their hollow bones whistling in the whirling wind, tore through the cloth and closed over his body. He could feel the lizards moving, and tried not to look them in the eye. But the backs—he saw their backs, and on one was a terrible song of wind through broken windows, and on the other was a complicated algorithm concerning cloud patterns, and together he thought they might say something about the staying of rain.

Suddenly, the wind began to shriek—truly shriek; dozens upon dozens of throttling screams rolled past Seven's ears, men's cries and women's keening, children's hitching sobs. Clouds whipped by him, sharp and hard, slashing his cheeks. He felt warm blood dripping from his chin. The rain was nothing, he could not even feel it, but the terrible shrieking and the hard clouds, they clutched at him, trying to reach him through the cage of Idyll's arms. The ferry pitched and bobbed on the raging water, spray flinging itself against the two passengers. Wisps of gray cloud snapped from the wide wings like laundry on the line. Seven gripped the ferryman's frame and shut his eyes, buffeted and battered by the voices in the wind.

And as quickly as it had come, it was over. Seven stood on the ferry, his face bleeding onto the boards, Idyll slowly folding his wings up again under his cloak and picking up the long pole once more.

"What sort of storm did you expect in this place, Seven? They come through every few hours, like chariots rounding the last corner. Everything is plainly itself here, nothing more or less. You bear up under the Storm of Souls, and

cross the Lake of the Dead." The old man's mouth twisted into a mocking smile. "Are we not courteous, to name ourselves succinctly? Are we not kind? Be glad I have not yet tired of my work. Be glad the Moon is patient, or I would have pushed you overboard and had my peace."

Seven sat heavily against the mast. He wiped at his bloody face.

"But you are not dead, my friend," Idyll went on. "You are as you are, and untranslated. How did you ever find your way here?"

The boy shrugged. "There is a lake here, there is a lake there. A lake, and a cave, and a grove, and if you pay the maid who lives there," he cleared his throat, "if you pay her enough, she will open the cave and the grove and the lake, and let you pass."

Idyll snorted. "Strumpet. I shall have to have a word with her." Seven smiled weakly. "I find it curious," the ferryman continued, "that you have never once asked whether I carried her across, your tree-girl, and how she came, like you, or like me."

There was a long pause. "I know she came. I know it."

"I suppose you will see soon enough."

And indeed, it was not long before the mist cleared and a long silver shore spread out before them, glistening gray pebbles washed by weak gray foam. A small, paint-peeled dock jutted into the still-sulking water. Lashing the ferry to it, Idyll squinted into the murky forest that began just beyond the beachhead. He did not step onto the dock.

"This is the Isle of the Dead," whispered Seven, gripping the dock post with white knuckles. The ferryman burst into laughter, a short, shocking sound that echoed across the shore like an ax blow.

"There is no Isle of the Dead! The geography of this place is more complicated than you could possibly imagine! Why do you think these docks are needed, and a ferryman? I am no mere psychopomp—I am the lake-pilot. I know all the waterways, all the Isles. There are as many as there are whales in the sea, and more, whales and sharks and tortoises together. Perhaps whales and sharks and tortoises and anemones. I know them all, I know the navigable paths, I know where to take each wretched soul that comes to my dock. You wanted to go after her? This is where she came. This is where I brought her, and she paid as dearly as you, never think she did not. She wanted to come to

this shore alone of all the others. This is where I take the Stars, it is the Isle of Lost Light, and I would not take you beyond it—you are not qualified, and neither are they."

Out of the Garden

DINARZAD FOLDED HER HANDS IN HER LAP. ON EVERY FINGER WAS a ring of gold and tiger's-eye, and so her hands seemed to look back at her, baleful and fiery and sad. The braziers flickered and warmed her shoulders, and through veils the color of a peacock's head she watched the banquet which seemed to whirl around her like dishes around a mute centerpiece, or dancers beneath a tall, elaborate lamp that has no choice but to shine. The ivory circlet cut into her skin, and in the morning her forehead would be red and chafed. The man beside her had a thick mustache, and had brought her as the sixteenth in his parade of gifts a tiny bird of paradise carved from a single huge pearl, with a tail of trailing sapphires and topaz. Its eyes were dead and shimmering, and when you pulled the tail, some mechanism deep in the bird's throat chimed like a clock. She thought it was meant to be more like a crowing or singing, but to her it seemed nothing more than a clock marking the time. She pulled its tail. It chimed. She delicately placed her napkin over it, so that she would not have to look it in the eye.

She was thinking about the girl in the Garden.

It was the pirate ship that she remembered when she thought of the girl's stories, the pirate ship and the sad, broken Papess. She thought she understood that, how to give up and give in to the inevitable. She knew what inevitability felt like, how it tasted. It felt like the mustached man's hand on her knee. It tasted like his kisses. She wished that she could cut her hair like a Sigrid, so

that they would stop stringing it with jewels and brushing it straight. She wished she could cloister herself away from inevitable kisses.



She wished she were an orphan with endless tales to tell and no one to love her enough to bring her birds of pearl.

But she was not her brother, she could not bring herself to sit at that girl's feet and listen to her openly, she could not bear the possibility that the girl was not a bird of pearl, that she could not simply pull her tail and hear the chime she longed for. But she did long for it.

"And where is the little Sultan tonight, your brother?" said her suitor amiably, his voice like thick liquor, flowing over her and into her skin whether she willed it or no.

"He is hunting in the country, my lord," she said, not lifting her eyes under the deep blue veil. "After all, when he is not so little a Sultan anymore, he will not have time for such noble pursuits. He took our father's ebony bow and went to shoot a lion in my lord's honor, as a wedding present."

She wondered at how easy the lie was. *Is this how you tell a tale?* she thought. *You open your mouth and chime, let whatever seems lovely pour out, and hope it sounds more like singing than the tolling of a clock?* She warmed to her story and lifted her eyes demurely.

"My brother is most impressed with my lord. He prefers you infinitely to the younger man who brought all those ghastly roosters. He is most interested in the mechanism of your birds, which he feels is superior to the golden clockwork of that other man."

"Why, I should be happy to show him how it is done!"

"I am sure he will be most grateful, my lord—how generous of you, to marry his sister and show him such wonders! He will surely reward my lord beyond measure. My brother is a prodigy in the ways of diplomacy—he spends his nights in contemplation of the movements of nations and governors, and in the perfect halls of his mind he moves them as deftly and surely as *shatranj*

pieces. He thinks so often and with such intensity that I have with my own eyes seen steam pour from his head as from a kettle. He will be a great Sultan, when he is grown, and he will always remember the delightful singing of my lord's birds."

"Your voice is sweeter than all of my birds chiming at once."

"But not, I think, sweeter than those of all your wives chiming together."

But there she had gone too far, and a shadow passed over the oiled and perfumed features of her bridegroom. She coughed and summoned up a maidenly blush, lowering her eyes to her plate again. The gold was streaked with goose fat, and she had no appetite. Somewhere far off on its own long table was the spotted carcass of the giraffe neck, which was so rich and marrow-sweet that she could not stomach it. A few sapphires peeked out from her napkin. She pulled the strands, and shuddered at the sound.

When the night was over and her neck ached from keeping her head bowed, she went to the tower room and folded her cloak in half, then in quarters. It was red, dyed over and over until it was so dark that to call it red beside other reds was to call the sun bright beside a lamp. It was lined with deerskin, from some country so far off that the deer were shaggy and thick-pelted. Its lower hem was trimmed with black wolf tails. It was the simplest, least ornate cloak she owned. She pushed it slowly into her brother's pack, and with it the little pearl bird.

"I don't know where it came from," the boy said. "I certainly didn't bring it. You told me not to."

The girl ran her fingers over the fabric soft as ink. The wolf tails flopped over her small hands, and the deer fur ruffled back from the hood. "It's all right if you did."

"I didn't! I brought quail eggs and cinnamon candies! They were having goose tonight—I didn't feel right about that."

The girl considered it for a while, and decided that if he could not work out the clickings and whirrings of his sister's mind, it was far beyond her to do so. She unfurled the coat, and the boy helped her heft the thick, heavy thing over her thin shoulders. The prickle of the deer fur on her skin was strange and

thrilling, something akin to the slick tang of the cinnamon in her mouth. She smiled a little, and her teeth were cold in the air. As she arranged the folds around her by the side of her lake, which was strewn with leaves and duck feathers, the little bird fell out into her hands. She looked at the boy curiously, but he shook his head. She pulled the string of sapphires and topaz, and the pearl bird opened its intricate mouth, letting loose a loud, clear chime, like the tiniest church bell in the world.

The girl laughed.

THE TALE OF THE CROSSING, CONTINUED

SEVEN STEPPED OFF THE DOCK ONTO THE WET beach. Idyll was already punting away from him, the flash of lizard tails peeking out from his cloak every now and then. The young man walked up the shoreline, gingerly, trying not to look down—for the beach was strewn not with gray pebbles, as it had seemed when he saw it from the lake, but with thousands of closed eyelids, glistening silver and wet, which opened wherever he stepped, their irises pale and accusing. They wept constantly, and their tears mingled with the lake foam in salty waves. He clutched his empty sleeve and did not look down, though his stomach lurched with each wet and yielding step. He was relieved when the coast of eyes gave way to gray loam and skeleton leaves, and the forest spiked up around him, bare and thin-branched, birches and larches and gnarled oaks with no leaves clattering in the lackluster wind.

But he did not know how to find her. He wandered in the wood, and no bird called, no deer chewed acorns, no mouse scurried past. There was no sun, and he could not tell where he went—but he went on. He was frozen and numb with a damp that crawled over him like a pair of lizards.

"What have you done now, you silly old cripple?" The voice came from nowhere; the wood wound ahead of him in its patches of gray and white, empty and still. But he knew the voice—oh, how he knew it.

"Oubliette, where are you?" he whispered.

One of the trees, an old twisted ash, turned around, and it was his Oubliette, her hair brown and fog-plastered to her neck, her eyes wide and sad, her dress,

what was left of it, pale and clinging. He ran to her—who would not have run? He ran to her and she put her arms around his neck, her brow on his mangled shoulder.

"Why did you come after me? How will you get back, you stupid boy?" she said ruefully, shaking her head against him.

"I came to save you," he said, surprised and confused. "It's what we do, isn't it? We save each other."

Oubliette pushed him away. "I didn't need you to save me! Do you know what it cost me to get here?"

"Do you know what it cost me to follow you?" Seven exploded.

She turned again on her heels, and her tree-side whipped around, pitted and petrified—and smooth, not tail at all. He had not seen her because she was all tree now, her sweet tufted tail gone. "I paid him in flesh, the ferryman and his awful lizards. I assume you did, too? You spent the last of our dhheiba to get here? To *save* me?"

"Not the last."

Oubliette's eyes blazed, her skin suddenly less than gray, flushed with anger. She threw herself against him, almost knocking him to the forest floor, and kissed him with such ferocity and brutal strength that he could not breathe. Her mouth was hot in the freeze and the fog, her teeth cracking against his. She drew blood from his lip and tore away, her mouth still stained with his, scarlet in the gray.

"That's what you wanted, wasn't it? The grateful kiss of a rescued maiden? Her pretty hand in yours? Doe eyes batting stupidly at you? Just like a miller's son!"

"No! No! Oubliette, I never wanted you like that, you know that!"

"Well, why not?" She laughed, desperate and shrill. Seven looked at her, his eyes full of tears, his back bent and broken, his sleeve dangling.

"There are some things you never get over," he whispered. "What do you see when you look at me? Tell me what you see; tell me you see a man. Tell me."

Oubliette cringed, her mouth twisting into an ugly grimace. She was so much older now, he saw. Her jaw was hard and sharp, her face her own, entirely, without the smallest hint of a child haunting it.

"Bone," she hissed. "I look at you and I see bones. Bones and coins."



"I know." Seven reached for her again, and she let herself be held, shaking like a caught deer. "You saved me, my friend, my only friend. I had to save you. *I had to*."

"I *chose* to come here. I wanted to come. I went to the lake—"

"I know! I went, too! Did you see her?"

"Yes! She was beautiful, so beautiful, and her face was so dark—"

"Were you scared?"

"No, well, yes—were you?"

"Of course! Did you do it?"

"I had to! Did you—"

"Yes—did you throw up?"

"No, but I wanted to, when she cut me to fill her bowl—"

"All that red! It was like—"

"Before. Yes."

The two looked at each other, half smiling.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Seven said against her wild-smelling hair.

"Not really," she snorted, wiping her eyes. "What is one entrance to the underworld? It's always the same, the blood and the hooded lady and the cave. You give what you can, you go into the dark. The dark took us. No more needs be said."

"There is always more. Tell me, like you used to, when I warmed your bark with my belly and you kept your hair so short."

"You were always tiresome and greedy." Oubliette sighed, but she was smiling a little. "I went to the lake…"

THE TALE OF THE DANCING GIRL'S DESCENT

TAGLIO KEPT HIS ABSENTIA IN A LITTLE BOX, too, did he tell you that? He showed me once, and he wept over them, shriveled and black, knocking in an or angewood box like the rattle in a snake's tail. He wanted me to see them because I am a huldra, and so in some roundabout sense he had mutilated himself for me. For my grandmothers, for my celestial aunt. I wrinkled my nose—it is embarrassing to witness another person's faith laid out like that, reduced to something small and dry and lifeless, a reliquary full of toenail clippings. I think he always liked me better than you. He had never met a real huldra. We were abstract; the story of the Heifer-Star and her brother was real. I was proof of his religion, I was as good as a Star, and I slept against his stomach between the cart handles. He looked at me and told himself he was right, that the dull, phantom ache between his legs was sacred.

I don't know anything about that. I am only myself. I have always been made of wood and girl and cow, and that is no more a divine revelation to me than a man's thumbs are to him. You never thought I was proof of the existence of a god. But I felt sorry for our green gazelle—do you remember his little cape?—and I let him tell me I was holy. It seemed the least I could do. We hunted together while the Manticore taught you to pick pockets and sing scales. He was so quick with those teeth, and I became as quick as he. It was so hard to stay by you—I looked at you and shivered as though the hollow walls of the Mint were still all around me. I looked at you and knew I should have taken the burden, I should have lain under the stamp. It was my idea; it was wrong of

me to let you do it. I looked at you and remembered everything. With Taglio singing little rhymes to the rabbits until they were close enough to snatch, I forgot.

And I forgot when I danced. When I was Zmeya, I was beautiful, and strong, and immune to all hedgehogs. When I was Zmeya I could not be touched. I did not have to be a tree-girl who had lost a kiss to the miller's son, or her hair to a unicorn, or seven years to a factory. I was her, and I was green, and I writhed. And as the music became quicker, as you joined in with Taglio and played his little flute, I understood less and less that I was not her. On the hunt he called me holy; in the dance I knew I was divine. If it seems silly now, at least I have the consolation that many others had gone before me in madness for love of her, for love of the snake and the sky. I cannot explain it better. I danced her so often that I felt her in me, I felt her far off in the dark, coiling around herself in the fog. What damage does the telling of a story play upon its teller? I told her story hundreds of times. I could not bear to remain outside of it.

The day after you kissed me—I was not angry, don't think I was. I never thought of it again. Taglio and I went after supper. We were on the track of a fawn. I lay on my belly in the moss and birch leaves and watched its spots flash in and out of the wood. He lay beside me, and we whispered to each other while our prey chewed twigs.

"You look like a snake lying there. I am sure it is not an accident, and I am sure you are about to leave us," he hissed accusingly.

"Why would you say that?"

"You are barely here. I can almost see through you. You would speak to no one, and only dance, if you did not like to hunt so well. If you did not like me so well. And I have begun to wonder if you do not like me only because I once saw her."

I turned my head slowly, so as not to start the deer. "Don't say that. You are my cart-knight."

"For now. But you left us days ago—I felt you go. Now there is only this stranger in your place, lying to me and telling me she is you."

I looked at the mash of old, broken forest beneath me. "You do not want me to stay. That is why you say such awful things."

With equal slowness, he cupped my head in his hand. “Darling huldra, bull-born and borne to me by a fortunate wind—go. I will not be the one who keeps you, and we will soldier on without your moods and your scowls, much as we love them. Find whatever you are already looking for.”

“I will go,” I mumbled, “to the Isle of the Dead and do what you could not.”

He blinked, as though I had cut into him with my hunting knife. I saw his lip tremble, in anger or grief or hope, and a long while passed when we did not mark the fawn at all, but wrestled in our gazes. Finally, he drew from his vest a little brown box, and drew from it a silver-black leaf.

“Don’t fail us,” he said, and as one, with the leaf clutched in my hand, we sprang out of the brush and took the fawn down in one single red stroke.

How do you find the land of the dead without dying? Everyone has a story of that place. It is gray and lonely, it is a raucous circus, it is a place of judgment where the soul is weighed against a feather, it is nothing at all, I do not care, little girl, go away and don’t steal milk from my cow. You could ask a thousand folk and hear a thousand tales.

Or you could go to an astrologer and by turning your back amaze him into drawing you a map to an almond tree which is almost a legend, but which is in actuality your petrified, mistletoe-infested grandfather, and tell him that if he does not tell you the way, you will cut him right down and not even weep, for he never should have touched your grandmother at all.

You could brandish an ax to make your point. It would have to be a very sharp one. The tree might ask how he would know the way. You might say that he is neither living nor dead, being mostly Absentia and almonds, and surely able to tell you how to slip into the in-between places. The tree might grumble, but only one or two swings of the ax, only one or two showers of wood chips would probably induce him to shout and wail and holler out just exactly how to find a lake with a woman living near it, at the mouth of a cave.

The tree who is some part of your grandfather might then whip his branches around and try to catch you, slapping at your arms—but it is too awful to think about, and you would get away as quickly as you could, and would certainly never tell anyone about it.



There is a lake here; there is a lake there. It does not seem much like any other lake, save that its beach is littered with thin slivers of glass like raindrops. Over that sharp shore I walked, with my good, solid shoes well bought, and my steps echoed across the water like shouts. So I should not be surprised that she was awake and waiting for me, a black cowl drawn over her face, so that I could only see a long hoopoe's beak, long and thin and curved, pointing out at me. Her black skirts spread out over the ground in drooping folds, on and on, down the beach and into the black water, and it seemed that there was no difference between the cloth and the lake.

"Let me pass," I said.

"Pass what?" she said, and her voice seemed hollow in that clacking beak.

"Pass through you, to the land of the dead."

"You may try to pass through me, but you will find I am very thick, and made more or less of bone and meat, and therefore I am afraid you will find it tough going."

I blinked at her, and she threw off her hood, revealing a middle-aged woman, neither thin nor fat, with the beginnings of gray hair creeping through brown, and skin like an old blasted oak. Her eyes were narrow and dark. She reached behind her head and loosed a clasp, pulling the beak away from her face—she was only a woman, with a mouth and a nose and teeth like any other.

"Didn't you like my joke?" She laughed. "One doesn't get many opportunities to chat in my line of work. The least you could do is chuckle a little. Maybe even giggle. Don't girls still giggle out there in the world?"

"I'm out of practice," I grunted.

"So am I, dear. Maybe it was not a very good joke."

"What do I have to do to get through?" I am afraid I was very short with her. Perhaps you did better.

She sighed. “You might listen, instead of talking so much…”

THE MOURNER'S TALE

I OCCUPY A STRANGE PROFESSION. IT IS ONLY slightly stranger than my previous employment. I was once a mourner by trade, an avocation which harpies take particularly well to, having a screech like no other creature.

Did I forget to mention? Well. Don't look under the cloak.

We know what a lament is better than any who walks on five toes. When we are required, we live with a corpse for weeks on end, we live with our lament until it has shape and heft, until it has the weight of the corpse, and in the putrefying gases we detect the virtue or degeneracy of the subject. Decomposition does not lie. We lament not when we are told to, but when the lament is finished, be it days or years hence. When we can hold its hand and walk down the street of a city, showing it the grocer's where the deceased bought her carrots and turnips, the butcher where she cut her meat and in secret met her lover, the gallery where just once, a portrait of her hung, then the lament is grown and done. It nods sadly and passes through all these places to a grave, where we screech and sing and tear our hair, where we rend our breasts and howl grief into the ground.

Once, in Irsil, which is poor and sad in all things save retired soldiers with broken swords and useless plowshares, we took fifteen years to rear the lament of a certain general. We walked it through the shanties and the porches where old officers told their bloody tales to the wind, and they followed behind, falling in like ranks, to hear how the old man was mourned.

It is necessary work. I was good at it. I suppose that is what got me here.

One cannot, among the mourning harpies, be truly considered adept without the hoopoe's beak. We can crow and keen and split your ears into bloody halves with the anguish in our throats—but not all of a lament is sorrow. Even in the old general's scar-kneed life there was sweetness—there was a woman in a village who looked like his mother, and he married her, and we did not refrain from commenting on that, for a lament has no shame—but there was a moment before he left on campaign when the woman who looked like his mother showed him twin babies, a boy and a girl, and he could not breathe for the sweetness of their cheeks, and we sang that, too.

But it is hard to sing of sweetness with a harpy's mouth. We are made for rending. It is hard to simply weep.

We must go and get it, the beak, and we may not steal it, but must sing the hoopoe's lament when it dies, and if its chicks deem the lament sufficient, they will give it over. In such a way the hoopoe ration the grief of the world.

I was past thirty by the time I went to get my beak. Not a few of the others were unsure that I would ever be ready to wear it. I am sure you wonder at the hoopoe—are these not tiny, colorful, but shallow and flittering birds? How could a beak like a dove's wishbone ever produce such funeral songs as I speak of? But I say to you that once there were great hoopoes the likes of which you have never seen in these fallen days. Their rose-orange wings were like those of an albatross, and their beaks were trumpets, and we were the wind blown through them.

I went into the mountains. I will not bore you with the details of a Quest. They are all much the same: One goes forth, one obtains, one returns. But when I found a huge old mother hoopoe dying in her nest, I crouched down among her flame-headed chicks, their feathers tipped in black and white speckles, to hear the life of the bird I would lament. She turned her old downy head to me and this is what she said:

THE HOOPOE'S TALE

MY EGG WAS HARD TO BREAK. THE YOLK WAS golden and ropy. I opened my eyes in such brightness. My mother pierced her breast with her beak, and fed me on her blood, which tasted like flying. She called me Orange as the Sun.

The tide came in, the tide went out. I ate worms and beetles.

I sang very loudly and so did another hoopoe whose tail was black and strong. I made a nest of hazel and down and bits of a strange, sweet red wood that a raft-builder had left carelessly behind. I laid three eggs that year, and four the year after. I pierced my breast with my beak, and fed them on my blood, which tasted like flying. I called them Pink as a Fat Worm and Speckled as a Shadow and Red as Mother's Blood and other things. There were a lot of them. It is hard to remember.

The year after that I laid one, and last year I laid five. So it goes.

The tide came in, the tide went out.

A hawk chased me once. She made a dent in my skull and another in my beak. I clipped out one of her eyes.

A cat mauled the hoopoe with the black tail and my last eggs were from one with a blue crest.

Now I am old, and I have no blood in me for more children.

It was a good life.

THE MOURNER'S TALE, CONTINUED

I HELD HER OLD WITHERED HEAD IN MY HANDS like a browned apple, and her thirteen chicks gathered around, Pink as a Fat Worm and Speckled as a Shadow and Red as Mother's Blood—and also Blue-Bottomed as a Jay, Rosy as a Burned Farmer, Sour as a Hungry Badger, and all the rest. I raised up my head and sang of that diamond egg, the struggle to shatter it, the light of the morning sun on that shimmering yolk, the taste of Mother's scarlet blood! I sang of the beauty of the black tail, of the smoothness of infant eggs, of the flow of blood from Orange as the Sun's breast, the sting and the pain of her children's beaks on her breast. I sang of the frightful, bitter-voiced hawk, and the great battle which lost the bird of prey a precious eye. I sang of the wicked cat and the lost mate. I sang of new love with a blue crest. I sang of all those eggs, all that blood, and an empty chest singing out at the end of its days.

I flew down the mountain with Orange as the Sun's beak in my hands, slightly dented from the hawk fight—but the dent made the sweetest, most broken and sorrowful notes of any beak. I tied it onto my face and began my trade.

Some years hence I was approached by a clutch of women weeping like hoopoes for their comrade, a corpse they carried on a bier made from the prow of a ship. She had white hair and a smile on her lips, and I listened well as they told me her life. I took the body to my accustomed place, hidden away in a forgotten and empty land by a little lake where I would not be disturbed for the years it would surely take to bring up this woman's lament from infancy.

But they had paid me well, those women, and I settled into my task, combing the fading corpse for its tale. It smelled sweet, and nothing at all like a corpse, like roses and incense, much as you may mock me to hear such things said. I learned much from her slow rotting away to nothing, and though her body is gone, I am still fashioning her lament.

Before it shivered away to dust, I happened to catch a glimpse of the great bier in the water, and to my surprise, the skeleton had the head of a decrepit old fox, whose fur might have once been red.

THE TALE OF THE DANCING GIRL'S DESCENT, CONTINUED

"I STAYED HERE SO LONG AND FOR SO MANY years that the other harpies forgot all about me." She drew aside the long folds of her cloak and beneath them I saw that her harpy-body, covered in brown feathers, had grown entirely into the earth. There was now little difference between feathers and leaves, and her legs were gone altogether. She grew up out of the dirt like a stubby sapling. She chuckled and closed it again. "I told you not to look. I have been here so long the ground came up to greet me, and we have gotten along very well. I chew dirt like a shrub, and the strange roots of this place ensure I have time to finish her lament. The cloak grows like foliage, and my face has set into something like bark. But even in my work, even as the dirt came up to hear my lament in its youth, I began, in my songs, to catch wafts of other bodies from the cave, the beginnings of other laments that cried out to be raised properly. I understood—though slowly, for have I not already said that I was a slow student?—where I had made my nest. Once in a very long while folk interrupted my work on the fox-girl's lament to ask passage into the cave. At first I told them I hardly cared where they went, but as I guessed at the true shape of the cave, that it was something like a door, I thought it only right that tolls be exacted."

"What sort of tolls?"

The harpy grinned. "There is only one kind of toll the dead accept: blood. It's always blood. The hoopoe, the Gaselli, the Stars. Pierce your breast with your beak and pour out your blood for the hungry."

I moved my hand to my chest. “What is in there? What is the Isle of the Dead?”

“Who can say? I am planted, I am not dead. Is it where the Sky went to escape her children? Is it the underside of the Sky? Is it just another country, with other laws and customs? No one tells Wept, she is just the keeper of the gate.”

“Is that your name? Wept?”

“I have done it all my days, and never for myself. It is my name; it is my nature.”

I pulled my calf-knife from its sheath and she pulled her bowl from the shadows. I paused, and cut into the skin of my back, letting sap puddle in the metal bowl, golden and thick as yolk. Wept raised her eyebrows and smiled widely, as a child will when shown a new thing. She pulled her cloak aside to let me pass, and I felt her feathers on the wound as I went into the dark.

THE TALE OF THE CROSSING, CONTINUED

"YES," SEVEN BREATHED. "I HAD ONLY BLOOD to give her, of course. And she told me no tales, but I remember her face, and her bowl. But why?" he pleaded. "Why did you leave me? I would never have left you."

She looked at him with blank eyes. "I stole a leaf," she said simply, and took his hand, leading him up and into the forest, far past the lapping sound of the lonely lake against the lonely shore.

It was not a town. Nor exactly a village. It was certainly no city. But there were houses, low gray things slick with old rain, as though someone had once lived there, long ago. It was very dark on this part of the island, and there were pricks of light in the mire, almost, though not entirely, like Stars. One of them spun very quickly, faster and faster until a woman seemed to step out of it. She was flushed with color, all the color that the forest might have had, nearly too vivid to look at. Her skin was like a snake's, scaled and thick and a screaming, writhing green, shot with black and blue and scarlet. Most of her undulated serpentine and boneless, her torso longer and more flexible than a woman's ought to be. She wore yellow veils that whipped and snapped at her heels, but covered nothing in particular, not least her green skin, which showed dark and shining through the gold cloth. Her hair was long and black and glassy, and the bangles around her arms were jeweled in a hundred kinds of agate. Her eyes were black as the bottom of a well, and her blue-black fingers were long,

grasping. Her legs were clamped together, as though by sheer hope they might squeeze into a tail, but they stayed stubbornly separate.





She was pregnant, her verdant belly sloping out of her veils like Vhummim's diamond.

"I brought her the leaf," said Oubliette, by way of an explanation Seven did not at all understand. "Immacolata's leaf. I danced her for so many years, I loved her, I didn't want her to be alone. I owed it to her, to both of them, to find the cave and the lake and cut off my tail. We are not… unhappy here, together."

"I am not alone," the woman said, her voice throaty and deep, echoing through the wood. "No one will let me alone…"

THE TALE OF THE LEAF AND THE SNAKE

I LOOKED DOWN OUT OF THE DARK, WHERE light held hands with light. I remember the looking, and the first searing step out of the Sky, how it hurt so, and how I cried out for my mother as I fell. They caught me in their green, my limbs so raw and full of light, slashed to ribbons, bleeding out of the pits of my knees, the hollows of my elbows, the nape of my neck—all the places where a hole can tear. I bled and I wept—we all did. We wanted to burrow into the world, but we didn't know how it would hurt.

And the snakes were there, their green and their white and their black, their red and their gold. Their sheltering hoods, their comforting tails. I looked at them, how they stopped up my wounds with their little mouths, how they warmed me with skin that had baked on flat rocks in the sun, how they hissed and sang their whispering songs. I looked at them and I wanted to be like that, I wanted to be able to move like that, to undulate, to hiss and sing and have colors like that. They were as beautiful to me as anything had been since the dark, and while my brother was sharpening himself into a harpoon, I lengthened, and stretched, and arched my back, and coiled until all of me was a coil, long and green and grinning. And where I first slithered, stepping lightly into a snake's body, I crushed beneath me a tea bush with delicate leaves, and thought no more of it than a woman who breaks a twig underfoot while running through a forest.

I was not there when the Manikarnika died, but I heard them cry out. We all did. I slid over the hills and away with the rest—I did not want to be alone. So

many of the smaller Stars saw my coils and, delighted, shivered into their own. We cloistered together, we ate sparrows and mice whole, or capons and honey, as was our liking. Our shapes changed with the hour; we were fluid as rivers. We were not alone.



I knew his face when he came. Of course I knew it. Even a Star dreams. I have been dreaming a long time, and I watched the glittering cord of that man's life spool out until it intersected with mine, and how the sparks lit the grass at my feet! I looked at this man and thought: *Oh, how we are going to hurt each other.* But Stars, you know, are fixed in their courses, and we can no more change the throttling paces of orbit than a rabbit can shorten its ears. I saw his cord lashing and snapping in the dark, and could do nothing.

A moth told me the day I was going to die.

I sat in my room, and my children were all around me, playing with toy swords and real ones, depending on their age, lolling about, their skins flushed green with relief—their father had left us alone for a day, and we could relax into serpents, let our scales show through. We had each other, and no one would disturb us.

I sat at the window. The wind came through off the tea fields, sweet and brown at the edges. My son was mending the hem of my dress, his mouth full of pins. My daughters played Chaturanga, their shoulders warm as diamondbacks in the sun. Some other of my boys chased a white kitten I had brought them, their eyes bright and hungry. We were not alone, not ever. I wiped the youngest's nose, and told her to keep her tongue in her mouth—the pink and forked thing licked in and out feverishly. These are the things a mother does—did not the Sky once wipe our noses and tell us to stand up straight, did not the blackness of our mother admonish us to raise our voices and be curious, be bold, to look after one another when curiosity and boldness failed? Did she not tell us she loved us, that we were never alone?

In the dark at the beginning of the world, she said those things. And I said them to my children, though the words often stuck in my mouth, and I did not

expect to say them, when I burned incandescent beside my brother and not beneath that snapping cord, that man whose breath stank of frightened women and into whom my light leeched, and leeched, and leeched. I did not want children. They were a poor substitute for what I lost—did the Sky feel the same? Is that why she left us? But I looked at them that day and knew that they came from me, that he chewed a hole in me and they swelled up so bright, so bright! And they are why I did not leave. Perhaps I do not understand my mother—but I think that is not unusual.

I sat by the window and my hand was green as vines on the sill. The moth landed on my forefinger, nailless now and scaled. His wings were pale brown, with circles like marks left by cups on old wooden tables. He was not special. Perhaps neither was I. I wore him for a moment like a jewel before he turned his furry head up to me and spoke, his voice susurring and small, twigs rubbing against dry leaves.

"If you will not eat me, I would tell you a thing."

"Why would I eat you, little moth?"

The insect paused, his feelers twitching. "You are a very large snake. At least, some of you is."

"And you would make a very small meal."

"I am grateful…"



THE TALE OF THE BIRDS' TEARS

WE KNOW BECAUSE OF THE BIRDS.

In Amberabad, there was a moth with yellow wings like a wolf's eyes, and she drank the tears from the eye of a sleeping hunting hawk. The tears were cloudy and sweet, like dandelion milk.

In Muireann, there was a moth with black wings like the back of an otter, and he drank the tears from the eye of a sleeping pelican. The tears were blue and clear, like the ice from a frozen river.

In Shadukiam, there was a butterfly with wings like spun glass, and he drank the tears from the eye of a sleeping parrot. The tears were red and glimmering, like the petals of a rose.

In Ajanabh, there was a moth with gray wings like dust on a book's cover, and she drank the tears from the eye of a sleeping mynah bird. The tears were yellow and dusty, like saffron.

In Al-a-Nur, there was a butterfly with blue wings streaked in white, and she drank the tears from the eye of a sleeping swan. The tears were bloody and dark and salty, like a thing not to be touched.

Near a castle in the center of the Eight Kingdoms, there was a moth with great flapping wings that cast delicate shadows, and he drank the tears from the eye of a sleeping goose. The tears were gray and slow.

In Jinnestan, there was a dragonfly with a body all of black and green, and he drank the tears from the eye of a sleeping alerion. The tears were sharp and piquant, as though teeth had been ground into them.

In Hoaka, there was a moth with gray wings like blown ash, and he drank the tears from the eye of a sleeping ptarmigan. The tears were rosy and thin, like a girl's perfume.

In the city of Lament, there was a very small moth with the whitest wings you ever saw, and she drank the tears of a sleeping hoopoe, and the tears were soft and fine, like the hair of children.

In Irsil, there was a butterfly with no wings at all, who with her very last strength drank the tears from the eye of a sleeping sparrow. The tears were spicy and thick, but they did her no good.

In Kash, there was a moth with wings all flaming and smoking, and he drank the tears of a sleeping phoenix, which were molten white, like a blade not yet born.

In Urim, there was a moth with wings like mourning veils, and he laid them over the eyes of the dead. He drank from the tears of a blood-cold kingfisher. The tears were red as apple skins, and blue as moonlight.

In Nahara, there was a moth with wings like a church window, full of brilliant greens and reds and blues. She drank the tears from the eye of a sleeping loon. The tears were black and thick, like an ebony sill.

And in Varaahasind, there was a moth with brown wings like a hundred other moths, and he drank the tears from the eye of a sleeping peacock. The tears were blue and green and gold, like the skin of a snake, and his name was Fahad, and he came to this window, his belly full of tears.

What do the birds dream that makes them weep so? We might have asked, but they are quick to eat, and not to converse. Instead we flutter over the face of the world, in every dusty pocket and lantern halo, and drink their grief, and taste their mourning in the draft. Eggs that fall from the nest and break on the grass, terrible strands of yolk flung from blade to blade, not enough seeds in the winter, falcons with claws that snatch, fish which are too clever by half—ah! We have known these sorrows! But once in a long while there are the flavors of other miseries floating there. It took all the tears I have mentioned and more for us to taste the whole of it. We brought them, clinging to a thousand proboscises like diamond necklaces, to the cistern at the center of Ilinistan, the City of Insects, which is a place you are not permitted to know. There is flame there which does not burn the wing, and webs which do not

tear, and rivers of sugar water trickling through mossy stones. There hives make honey for joy in its gold, and not for the hungry mouths of men. There ants may rest, for winters do not scour us, nor is any sweet thing rare.

There are so many flowers there, my lady, you cannot imagine.

And in the center of Ilinistan, there is a cistern, where the ants and the beetles and the termites hollowed a stump so smoothly and perfectly that anyone might be proud to write upon its walls as though it were the finest paper, save that the stranger should be promptly devoured by spiders for the offense. And once in a long while, the drinkers of tears commune there, to understand the sorrow of the birds, who are also not permitted to know the way to Ilinistan. So we let our tears fall, one by one, blue by white by red by green by yellow, into the cistern, until it is full to brimming, and we can look in its waters and see the shape of the thing that the birds mourn.

In the cistern, oh lady, oh Star, oh lost and lonely thing, I saw your face, and knew that your course would pass under the ground, where only the worms go, to whatever pale, blind city they call their own, and which I am not permitted to know.

THE TALE OF THE LEAF AND THE SNAKE, CONTINUED

THE MOTH REGARDED ME FOR A MOMENT.

"Will you not weep, lady? Do you not care?"

"I am more interested, friend Fahad, in the existence of a place which I am not permitted to know."

"He will come for you this evening, this very one."

"And he will find us dressed in our very best, as befits children awaiting a visit from their father, and a wife her husband."

I put my hand, very gently, to the moth's wings, and stroked the fine hairs. "Stars burn out, little moth."

But surely you know this story. Surely you danced it, or sang it, or heard it at your mother's breast. I am so common, these days. Everyone speaks in my voice.

I did not burn out. Oh, Mother, why did you not let me? You could have stitched me together again, as though the hole was never there, and I could have forgotten what it felt like to tear myself out of you, what it felt like to have children tear themselves out of me, what it felt like to dribble light into a man's mouth night after night. What my children looked like as they faded to nothing. What I looked like, too.

I did not burn out. I came to the lakeside, where, I suppose now, all things come. There was a sorry little dock in dire need of new paint, and a low tide, frothing gray water and sandpipers fishing for fleas. What sort of fleas do they find, I wonder? I walked the shore, and my elbows were damp. I was stuck between woman and snake, my body twisting out of one and into the other—did my mother wish to indicate that I should have made up my mind? I have already said I do not understand her. She probably had nothing to do with it. I walked the shore and I could see the ferryman coming, I could see his raft and his ruined mast, I could see his pole. And when he moored at the dock, I stepped forward, to climb aboard.

But the air thickened like cream around me, and there were hands on my chest, pushing me back. Dimly in the fog I could see the faces of my girls, my loves, my little Stars, their beautiful eyes burning up the air. They put out their hands to me, and I took them as I used to—they were cold, but women's hands are often cold. How many times do I remember breathing on them, rubbing them red again? They would not let me pass. They opened their mouths in unison, and I saw that their tongues were cut out. They pressed on me in unison and I staggered.

And in the throng I could see two, one with no eyes, and one with no ears, who cried out louder than any. They pushed and wept and their laments were like stones thrown after an unwanted child. They pushed me back from the shore, and the ferryman watched, but made no move. They pushed me back, and back, and back, to the wet green jungle and the red towers.

I opened one hundred and forty-five pairs of eyes.

They pushed me into those bodies, those bodies who had eaten me, chewed me to gristle, and still held me in their swilling bellies. It felt strange to move one hundred and forty-five pairs of arms. They seemed to pinwheel all around me, I could not keep them steady. I looked with my eyes into my eyes into my eyes, I was in all of them, and I could smell pig's flesh, always, always. They swallowed me down; I lived inside them like a child. And in the core of each of them, under the pig's heart and the pig's squealing lungs and the pig's starving stomach, was the little white blade of the pig's tooth. Only my husband was empty of that tooth, and him I could not bear to smell, or hear, or touch.

But the rest were a smoky labyrinth of pig and man, and I writhed through it, flashing green at their boiled and festering pinks.



I am tired, the boar's tooth said.

I am sorry for you, I answered.

I was only hungry. I didn't mean to eat all those maidens, all those boys, all those horses. But I was so hungry. What beast is blamed for its hunger? Only me. He cut me up like breakfast and pulled all these creatures out of me, and now I am hungrier still, I eat for a hundred and forty-five, my belly growls in one hundred and forty-five skins, and I am so tired.

I am sorry for you, I said in the depths of those hundred and forty-five. *He cut me up, too, like supper, and pulled children out of me, and I am tired, too.*

If I were myself again, I would eat him, and be sated.

Would you like me to help you?

Yes, oh yes.

But surely you know this story. Surely you danced it, or sang it, or heard it at your mother's breast. I am in everyone's mouth these days, just as I was then.

My brother saw to my body. It is in a cave somewhere, I think—sometimes I smell dripping water, and old stones, even now. I came again to the lakeside, and this time no one put a hand to my chest, or a wail to my ear. It was empty, and the wind wheedled the stones. No one came for me. I was alone. The dock had been painted. The sandpipers seemed fat. My hair was wet this time, wet with belly and tears. I waited a long time, but the ferry came, dragging dark water behind it.

I came from the lake to the Isle. I came from the Isle to the thing which is not a village nor a town nor a city. I huddled in the low gray houses, cold and alone. It was not pleasant, but it was not unpleasant. At least he was gone, and I only moved my own eyes, and not one hundred and forty-five pairs of eyes. I called out for my mother, but she did not answer. I called out for my children,

but they did not answer—though a low scratching came at the ramshackle door.

I opened the door, my own hand so bright against the gray. I do not know what I expected, but what I saw was a young woman whose body was covered in diamonds so that she had no skin which was not jewels, no pink or brown about her. Her hair was a river of ice. Around her were fourteen slips of light with no faces, like candles lit in a chapel.

"I'm sorry," the diamond girl said, and her voice was so familiar to me, though I had never heard it. "They never grew up, you know. They wanted to find you, they are drawn to you, Mother-moth, but they don't really understand, they don't really speak. They are just light, light which knows it was once something else, but which cannot quite recall. But you called them, and I brought them. They did want to come."

My children glowed around me in a ring, and little Diamond, bright as a burning pyre, smallest of the Manikarnika, folded me into her arms.

There are so few of us who ever died, this is a sparse and lonely place. But we are all together, and some reflection of our light floats around us, like lamps shining in a pool. My girls are here, my Grass-Snake-Stars and my Copperhead-Stars and my Cobra-Stars, my loves and my oracles, and we wander as we used to, our little cloister. I am never alone.

"Who built the houses?" I asked Diamond once. She shook her head.

"They were here. How should we know how to build houses? I think—" She blushed, and the diamonds in her face flushed into rubies for a moment. "I think Idyll built them for us. Surely there must be days when no one dies."

I would like to say time passed, but I cannot be sure. I would like to say, "One day I met two men walking between the birch trees." But what is day? What is night? It is always dark here, some anonymous kindness, to remind us of the cradle of the Sky. And so all I can say is that it happened sometime, and somewhere, among the white trees, in the dark. Two came walking hand in hand. They were both bright as I, but I did not know them. Their skin was red and deeply grained, like wood, and when we clasped hands in greeting, their fingers were hard as a raft's planks. They wore sailors' rags over identical bodies, and their eyes were wood-warm and gentle, lined a little at the corners

—but perhaps that was just the grain of their skin. Reddish hair flopped over twin foreheads like thready bark.

"We are Itto," they said in unison. One's voice was deep, and the other's high, like a child's, but beyond that they were the same in every fashion. "We were the Twinned Star once, and in this place, we have been made to walk two by two. We do not find it unpleasant."

They spoke always together, and it was only strange to me for a while. He had been translated into twins, as I had into my half-snake self, and their skin had gone the shade of their raft. They told me the tale of their raft, and their death, and their fox-girl, and I held them while they cried for the lost craft and the lost world—we are all so lost; we are all so broken, the least of us would hold the smallest as they wept. I told them the tale of my husband, and my children, who still followed me like confused will-o'-the-wisps. The two young men looked at me with chagrined, resigned eyes, as though they expected no more than this, and held four red arms out to me. I did not know what they meant. I told them of the boar-men, and how the voice of the boar-tooth sounded, and how the women stopped me at the shore. They folded me into their wooden arms on the floor of the forest, and I lay stiffly against them. I did not cry—snakes do not—but I was grateful for them, for their circuit of arms and because they had not sought me out, to show me their love, to make certain I was not alone, to show me some ill-got devotion, to disturb me in the dark. I softened against them, and they stroked my hair. I told them how I was just once alone, on the lakeside, the second time, when no one came for me.

My children lay around us in a ring, like glowing, insensate mushrooms.

"I am not a raft," I said, and the twins chuckled.

"We are not a King," they answered.

It was difficult to tell them apart unless they spoke, which was not often. One of them became my lover, and his deep voice sounded in my bones. The other was harder, more raftlike, and he was simply kind to me, his child's voice rare and thin. He helped me molt, and once, when there was almost something like a moon above the Isle, he came to me, having cut himself on the hinge of my door, and touched my lips with a light-smeared thumb. It tasted of salt, and wood. The other twin was with me always, and his kisses were red and dusty and gentle. They tasted like the sea. We walked in the wood, and once in a

while red fruit appeared on the trees like ambassadors from some far-off spring, and we all ate together. I was not alone. I am not alone. Who could think I have ever been alone?

But a girl came with a bloody stump where her tail should have been, telling me how lonely I am with her huge, needing eyes, clutching a leaf in her hand. I knew the leaf in a moment—I had seen it in the tea-woman, the distant child of the leaves I had crushed when first I fell. She brought it to me as though it would mean something to return my own light to me, like a child's doll which was discarded long ago, one eye missing, one arm empty of stuffing. I placed the leaf against my skin and it melted back into me where it belonged. I thought no more of it, and offered the girl my house, my red fruit, though she would not eat, the ungrateful thing. But perhaps it did mean something after all, because it was only afterwards that my belly grew.

I cannot tell if it was the light of one twin or the kisses of the other or the leaf itself or the girl who brought it that filled me up with child again. Perhaps it was all of them. Perhaps none. But I am not alone, even in my own skin.

THE TALE OF THE CROSSING, CONTINUED

"How is it even possible in this place?" Zmeya cried, cradling her stomach in her arms. "What will come out of me, that was born with the dead for midwives, a dead mother, a dead father?"

Oubliette looked down in shame. Tears were hot on her face, steaming into the air. She glanced up at Seven ruefully. "I'm sorry," she said. "I wanted to save you. To save her, the tea girl. I was just silly."

Zmeya's face softened, shades of green playing over her cheeks. "Oh, I don't blame you, poor thing. You are so lost, too. Can I help but tease you for those great hungry eyes, for all those things you said when you came here squeezing your little leaf? But why would you not eat at my table?" The Snake-Star moved forward to hold the huldra's head in her hands.

Oubliette laughed and wiped at her tears. "Anyone who has read a book in her life knows not to eat the food of the dead," she answered. The two women embraced briefly, as though they did not want to embarrass their visitor. Seven felt the weight of how much she had seen and done without him pulling at his sleeve.

"Why do they love you like this?" he demanded. They started back, away from his frayed voice. "Why does everyone fling themselves at you, just praying you'll catch them? Immacolata, Oubliette—they gave up everything just for you!"

Zmeya looked at him over Oubliette's bent head. "I don't know!" she hissed. "Who knows why you do anything? You look at us and call us gods and

sacrifice your seventh sons on altars we know nothing about! You build up towers we never asked you to build, and with your other hands you slaughter us and tell us that wood is too fine for the likes of us, and rape us until our legs crack! How should I know why some few of you fail to mutilate us? But if those few fling themselves at me, what can I do but catch them? Who will do it, if I do not? If I turn them away like bad children who ought not to trouble their betters?"

"They are not your children to catch!"

"Tell them that. And then tell me to turn away a girl who cuts into her body for my sake, tell her that she is not welcome, there are already too many sisters here, we have no room for more."

The one-armed boy turned to his friend with eyes that pleaded and prostrated. "Was I not brother enough?"

Oubliette glared at him. "There are some things you never get over," she spat. "You left Taglio and Grotteschi without a word. Were they not family enough? Have you thought at all of them, how they might miss you, how they might wish you had stayed, if they are closer to Ajanabh, within its gates, if Grotteschi is even now singing at shuttered windows?"

Seven said nothing.

"That is how often I have thought of you," she finished.

In the Garden

The twilight was thin and wispy over the lake. The girl's skin was warm under her cloak, but the boy trembled.

"When you finish the tales," he said, "when your eyelids have poured out all their ink between us and the Garden is black with them, will you leave me as Oubliette left Seven? As Seven left the Gaselli and the Manticore? Will you go off into a place I cannot touch and never think of me again?" He swallowed hard. "Or will you remember that there was once a nice boy who was not afraid of you, and walked in the Garden with you, and listened to you, and did not interrupt more often than is polite? Will you sit at a table of blue crystal with parrot wings for legs with fabulous monsters all around, eating lunches of leek and rose and think to yourself: I wonder whatever happened to that boy, where he is now, if he is married, if he is fat, if he has kept the Garden well trimmed?"

He could hardly look at her; his hands shook like brown cattails.

The girl scowled at him. "When I finish the tales, when my eyelids have poured out all their ink into your hands and I have nothing left for myself, will you run back to the Palace like a good prince and leave me to my fate, just as Hind left the beast who loved her? Will you go into rooms at whose doors I am not even allowed to knock and never think of me again? Or will you remember that there was once a nice girl who did not ask too much of you, and walked in the Garden with you, and told you stories that made your head swim with all manner of strange fishes, and thought so much for your safety

that she taught you all the secret places that were once hers alone? Will you sit with a Sultan's turban and crown on your head, a Sultan's bangle at your wrist, at a golden table borne up by the backs of perfumed slaves and think to yourself: I wonder whatever happened to that girl, where she is now, if she is married, if she is fat, if she has made friends among the demons?"

Neither of them spoke for a long while, the air between them heavy and sad as old rain. The girl clenched her teeth against the reassurances that yearned to come. They were soft and sweet and untrue. She did not know—how could she know?—what would happen.

"I think," the boy said, "that I would bring supper out to these stones, out to this lake, for fifty years, for all of my reign, in hopes that you would come back, with fresh ink on your eyes, and new marvels to tell. I would take down all the Garden gates, and someday there would be an old, white-haired man with green apples and roast dove in his napkin, sitting by the water and asking himself whatever happened to that girl."

She smiled, and touched his hand. The bird of pearl sat between them, unconcerned.

"We have the whole night," she said. "The moon is not even up. Shall I finish the tale of that awful, lonely Isle?"

"Yes," the boy breathed.

THE TALE OF THE CROSSING, CONTINUED

THE CHILD WAS LONG IN COMING.

Seven joined Oubliette in one of the long, empty gray houses. There were two windows, and two long beds, and a low, rough table, but she would not let him eat the apples and plantains and pomegranates that were laid out there.

"Who left us this?" Seven asked.

The huldra shrugged. "They tend to credit Idyll for anything strange and bright that does not come from them. But who can say? The second bed is new, as well. Maybe no one. Maybe it grows from the table like a spring of holly from a holly bush. Maybe this is a house-bush, and it blossomed up a new bed for you, and supper." She crooked a smile, and things went easier between them then, though they both wondered how long they could last without eating the rich red meal that each evening sat shining on the table.

They slept separately for half of a single night before Oubliette crawled in beside her friend like a wary cat.

In what passed for mornings on the Isle, one of the Itto twins might come and take them to see how the wispy lights of Zmeya's children wheeled along the forest floor, playing like butterflies or finches. Diamond might come with one of her sisters to bring sticks of fire to each of the houses' hearths, should the houses have hearths that day. They were odd, intractable shacks who might offer a fire grate once, and, if rebuffed, withhold them from everyone for weeks. So when hearths appeared, the Stars hastened to please them with sparks and crackling logs. Yet no matter how often Seven and Oubliette

politely told their house they were not hungry, or did not care for fruit, there it was the next evening, fresh and new and sparkling.



Sometimes Zmeya herself would come, with a kind, distracted smile, and her teeth were sometimes green and sometimes red, and her face was soon enough familiar to them as any neighbor's who often comes to borrow sugar or soap. Once she took them far into the Isle, into the bare forest, and showed them a little clear pool. She placed her finger on the water and it swelled up with brown leaves, tea leaves swirling thick and fast in the shape of a woman's face, a woman's face the color of the sole of a shoe, the color of oolong and lemon peel. The face wept sweet brown tears to see Zmeya, and more to hear the mortal pair tell of Taglio, and how he fared in the world. Oubliette and Seven thought that thin, warm voice was the loveliest thing they had ever heard.

At other times, Zmeya would take them walking down by the shore, and showed them a firm stone path among the blinking eyes which Seven had not seen, and they would watch the horizon for a sign of the ferry. There were algae on the lashes of the eyes, but the sandpipers did not come out that far, and only once or twice did they hear an owl, or a thrush, or the weird, whooping cry of a tiny hoopoe.

The lake was vast; the other side could not be seen, and when it rained, which was often, the water and the sky blurred into one great gray globe. Seven repaired the dock as best he could with no tools and one arm, which is to say not very well, but the effort was appreciated. Oubliette painted it with a mixture of boiled bark and beach-tears. It glowed ghostly in the water, and after a time, as was surely inevitable, the raft appeared within the great gray globe, and the ferryman brought a woman to the valiantly mended dock.

She was not yet a crone, but tending toward it as a weather vane will veer toward an easterly wind. She had long gray wings where her arms ought to have been, and her feet were webbed and yellow. Her hair was dark, streaked with wide bands of silver feathers, the thick black strands clearly losing their battle against the bird. There were well-grooved lines at her deep, wide eyes, and at her mouth, but she was thin and nimble as a goose in flight, and her cheeks were whipped and flushed by the lake gales. Her gait was businesslike

and brisk, her fingers long and purposeful, pushing back her fog-damp hair from her forehead. Her gaze went immediately to Zmeya's swollen stomach.



"I see I am needed," she said. Her voice was rough, as though she had been talking without cease for years on end.

Zmeya covered her belly with one long, green arm. "How long," she murmured, "do you think it takes a child to grow inside a dead woman?"

"As long as it pleases, I expect," the stranger said with a bemused grin.

Idyll glanced at Seven and Oubliette, and opened his mouth as if to say something, but closed it again. Finally, he grunted:

"The dock looks better. Shoddy joint work, though."

He slowly poled away from the shore and into the mists. The water lapped behind him, a sound like an infant crying far away.

"Well," said the newcomer, "that's done with. Now, Mistress of Snakes, Pig-Slayer, Star of the Jungle! Your brother is worried about you…"

THE MIDWIFE'S TALE

IN MY YOUNGER DAYS, I WAS A GOOSE.

This is nothing to gawk at. Geese are quite common in my country, which lies as far to the east as the ice floes lie to the north. When we moved through the sky, we were like a hand passed over the face of the sun, and the forests were in shadow. My name was Aerie then, and it remains.

But that was a long time ago. Now I am a woman, and my flock is gone, and my brother was King, for a time.

Perhaps you have heard this story. It is not so common as tales involving ravenous snakes, but some few minstrels still sing about the goose-girl and how she and her brother killed a tyrant.



My brother did not love a lonely chair in a lonely castle, and went long ago to join the Patricides in Al-a-Nur, where he is at peace, and wears a red habit. I was not there with him when he took his vows, though he sent men to find me to all the corners of the world, to beg me to come home. But that place, that castle with its rivers and its secrets, was not my home, and I hid when I heard them call. They

told him that they found geese and girls, but not both, and with a bent head he went out of the world, and out of our story.

I went to find the thread of our mother's tale and tuck it back into the stitching. Thus, I found a Quest after all. Perhaps it runs in the blood. I chased the tale into the high mountains tipped with snow like wise men's beards, and down to the sea, laid before me smooth as a dress. The world is wider than anyone guesses. It took years, and along the way, I had something like the education my great-grandmother might have given me. I learned the ways of the grass-and-leaves witch; I learned how to make love potions and cold cures and gout-softeners for those who could pay me, and to look up at the sky to tell a young girl whether her husband would have light or dark hair, and to deliver her baby when the time was right for it, and to bury her when the time was right for that. Silver came again to my temples, a silver like feathers. I did not mind the time, or the distance. That is what an education means.

Finally I went where I ought to have gone to begin with, to a burnt-out ring of trees and old huts half reclaimed by the golden grasses, where a wildcat hide was still hanging on a branch, and goose feathers blew like ashes through the paths that led from hut to hut. How many times the flock must have come to this place to mourn themselves! The blackened dome-frames smelled of horse tallow and scorched wood. The sun was bright and hard as I walked through the ruins, the old red sash of Leucrotta skin flapping against my hips. The place was not even big enough for anyone to plunder, and I wept for my mother for the thousandth time.

When the sun had drained itself into the western hills, I heard a colt snort in the distance, and found, not far off, a small black horse chewing the long, dry grass. It was not special—it was not the great black Mare I longed to see—but it was not afraid of me, and it nosed my pockets for apples. Ascertaining that I had none, it trotted off, and with a horsewoman's logic, I followed after. Soon I was at a dead run, streaming sweat just to keep her in sight. Often she would wait for me to catch up and then canter off again, and in this way we came, at length, to a great hollow cave. By the time I came to the crevice in the cliff wall, the colt was nowhere to be seen.

The cave was as empty as the razed village. How I wanted to see the Mare! Even the horrid Fox! But the chamber was empty, and the walls were smooth,

with no little door to let me pass, and no wolves came to greet me. If the Sleepers still lay within, there was no longer any path to them. I sat on the earthen floor of the cave and called out. My voice hardly even echoed.

My old bones were so weary, and I had come so far. I will admit to tears.

I fell asleep there on the dirt, my fists clenched like a baby's against my mud-streaked face. He was crouching above me when I woke.

"Why are you here?" he said, and his voice echoed—oh, how it echoed. He was a man whose skin was like paper, whiter than paper, paler than any mortal skin, like snow over snow. His hair fell long and straight to his waist, and over his shoulder was slung a large and barbed harpoon of bone. His eyes glowered golden, and his bent legs were covered in silvery tattoos, a whipping, curving tongue I could not read. Now, I know my grass and I know my leaves and I know my stories. Laakea the Harpoon-Star could hardly stare me in the face but I would know him. "Why do you come to this place?" he demanded. "It is not for you, not anymore. Go home," he spat. His scorn burned me as surely as a flame.

"I… I came because of my mother, to find the Wolf-Star, and the light…"

"You do not have claim to that light any longer. It is all used up. Go back to your love potions and leave us alone; we are not a fountain at which you may casually drink."

"Where did she go? The Wolf? The Sleepers? Where is the Mare?"

His face colored angrily. "The last girl came and went. This place is spent. It had a life, like any tree or beast. It was born when two sisters died here, and fed their gifts to a third, and ended when a horsewoman touched a Fox without permission. The Mare, as you call her, has probably already forgotten it existed. And Liulfr—my kin, not yours—went back to the Sky, to put those bodies in their graves, to do what Stars may do for sisters, and cousins, and kin. Go home. There is nothing for you here."

"But I have looked for this place all my life!" I spread my empty, grubby hands.

"I do not care! Why do you awful creatures insist that we care for every little thing you do?" The Star let out a terrible wail, his beautiful face contorting in grief, his head thrown back, tears streaming from his eyes like lightning. "One

of you killed my sister! If I could I would tear all of you apart for one glimpse of her whole again!"

"I did not kill your sister," I growled.

"It does not matter. When you look into the Sky, do you see our faces? No, you see a multitude, all the same. So it is when I look at you. My sister's body lies within, where the Sleepers were. She is more holy in her smallest blink than the lot of them, and she deserves this place no less than they. But I will not let any little girls drink from her like a cup."

"I… I didn't mean that. But I was young when I began, and now I am old, and if I do not take the light soon, I will die, and my family will perish in the dark."

"It is not yours to take. It never was. This is not about your family; it is about mine." He paused for a moment, his alabaster jaw set hard. "If you are unafraid of the dark, would you pay for the light your grandmothers took? I will give you, one last time, the light you seek, if you are willing to barter for it."

"Yes, anything!" Well, that is a foolish promise, but foolishness is not only the province of the young. He knelt before me, and I did not know what to do, but his eyes were huge, vast pools of gold and pleading.

"Find her. Find her and tell me where we go. Tell me what happens to us, tell me she is at peace. Tell her I love her. Tell her I tried to protect her. I cannot bear to think of her alone!" His voice broke and he was as miserable as a child lost in a dark wood. "Tell her I miss her so."



With that he drew his harpoon and thrust it into my heart.

THE TALE OF THE CROSSING, CONCLUDED

ZMEYA'S EYES WERE FULL OF GREEN TEARS. "I miss him, too," she said.

"He put his harpoon into me, and more light poured into my chest than my grandmother ever knew. It burned me through and through, like scalding oil poured down my throat. I felt it screaming in me and called out my mother's name, I felt it screaming in me and called out my brother's name, and my grandmother's, and all the names of my flock. The silver came bubbling up out of my mouth like blood and he drew back the blade."

Zmeya was nodding. "He never gave up more than a cupful of his light. He still burns where he walks, as we all did in the earliest days."

"It was enough so that I seemed to the ferryman a Star, and he brought me here, where I aimed."

"How much did you pay him?" Seven asked. Aerie blinked. "Idyll. What did you pay him to ferry you across? How much did you bleed for the harpy?"

The witch-woman laughed. "Coins are for the living, boy. For those who shouldn't be here, and for carrying back those who shouldn't be there. Blood is for those who have no business on this lake. There are other ways of getting to this place—namely, by dying. Laakea offered to cut my throat as quickly as possible, but I knew a faster way. I loosed my Leucrotta-sash from my waist and fell down as dead as when my brother snapped my neck. And here I am, half-goose, as I always was. We have an agreement—I will ferry back to him what he seeks, and he will tie it on again at the new moon." She looked the Snake-Star up and down again. "So, seeing that you require my more mundane

skills, I hope it pleases the child to come out sooner rather than later." She crouched down and spoke directly to the heavy bulge in the serpent-skin. "Do you hear that, little one?"

We showed Aerie the island, and cautioned her not to eat the red fruits if she meant to go back. She and Zmeya talked at length, cloistered together like novices, their heads bent, long wings folded around long scales. The serpent asked how she could possibly be with child; the goose asked if she had pains, chills, aches in her feet. It happened that they were conversing in this way when Zmeya cried out, her voice in the mist like eggs cracking, and fell against one of the gray houses, clutching her stomach. The house yielded hurriedly, cupping her back in its wall. The Itto twins came running, their red feet throwing up pebbles, and caught her up in their arms, whispering to her and stroking her hair and cooing against her neck. They cradled her against them as she pressed her cool snake's cheeks to theirs. Fourteen wan, wispy lights peered out from behind the thin trees, frightened and flickering. Aerie only shrugged and set to her work, her wings nearly as deft as hands.

"It did not hurt like this, before, with the others," Zmeya said, shuddering.

"You are dead. Your body does not want to give up this hot little clutch of life. It wants to keep it."

Seven and Oubliette looked on from a distance, and it seemed to them a terrible birth. Zmeya's shrieking shot out over the shacks, bleak and rasping. Her feet kicked out on the ground, and a sickly light spilled from her as blood might from a living woman. Finally there was a child in Aerie's wings, with great black eyes and a shock of dark hair, her skin gray and wet. Zmeya held her and smoothed her daughter's hair. The fourteen lights looked curiously over her shoulders. One of the Itto twins put out his ruddy, grained finger, and the baby gripped it, her fist sure.

"What will you call her?" Aerie said. "Names are so terribly important, you know."

"I shall call her Sorrow," whispered the serpent after a long while. "I shall give her now a surfeit of sadness, and hope that it will pay in one stroke for

happiness in all her days. Perhaps she will have more days than my other children."

The fourteen lights dimmed a little, but not much.

But it was not to be. The child was sickly, ill, her cheeks hollow. No matter how the serpent tried to nurse her hatchling, her breasts would not fill. No light came filtering through the branches to illumine her, to feed her. The babe's breath was hot in the air, her wails bright and cutting, the only living thing on an Isle of shades and Stars, and interlopers halfway between. The child had no light that anyone could see, and her little lips trembled in the cold, showing her pink gums, no more than a cold, hungry little girl. Sorrow could not be fed, and she slowly wasted, becoming thinner and thinner, while Aerie waited for the new moon.

"What is wrong with her?" Zmeya begged for answers.

Aerie sighed. "You are dead. You cannot feed a child with your hard, cold flesh. You cannot expect the child of dead Stars to glitter and gleam. She will die here, the only thing ever born in the land of the dead."

And Zmeya wept, bitter and keen. The lights around her flashed in grief. "Please, Aerie. Take her. Put her on the raft and when your sash is tight around you again, go quickly to the mourning beast by the glass-strewn lake which Oubliette and Seven sought, and take her from the cave—you can have a cave, at last, all your own. I cannot watch another child fade to nothing."

Aerie pursed her lips. "You did not want her, you know. It would be no worse than if you had never had her at all."

Zmeya drew herself up, her face grave. "Do not try to shame me, woman. A hole was chewed in me, and out she came, and she deserves a chance to step down out of the dark, as I did. She is my girl, delicate and small as a Grass-Star, and I love her, I do love her."

One of the Ittos, the one with the child's voice, touched Sorrow's damp hair. "She is ours, too, and we love her, and she ought not to perish here where no one can see what sort of beast a snake and a ship can make. Take her."

"What is it you would have me do? I am too old to rear a child to grown. I do not think Laakea is the fathering type."

Zmeya considered. “He would shut her away so no one could ever harm her, and she would never see the sun. Care for her yourself, I would ask you. Or if you cannot, find a family whose child is dead, and bear her into their open arms. Or take her to a family with linens in a new crib and jewels in their hair, with hearts which are fierce and sweet, and put her in their cradle in place of their daughter, like a magpie with her secret eggs. Find the mortal girl a home in some far-off kingdom, take her to a childless creature who might love her like its own young, but take her, take her away, and let Sorrow grow up happy and whole and fed, warm by a fire and in sight of the Sky.”

The twins stood on the mended dock and cupped their scarlet hands around their mouths. They made a long, desolate sound, like foghorns on a lonely bay. Seven and Oubliette held hands, and Aerie flared her wings in anticipation. The ferry parted the fog not long after. Zmeya bundled her daughter onto the raft, her tears splashing on the infant’s face.

“What is it you think you’re doing?” Idyll asked. “I do not bear passengers without payment. And I am not fond of being summoned like a maid.”

The assembled throng looked from one to another. “What payment can there be on this Isle?” the deep-throated Itto asked helplessly.





Slowly, Seven drew out a single yellow coin, of old bone, smoothed by his fingers. It bore a faint spider sigil. Oubliette looked at him, her eyebrows raised. “Is this child worth so much to you?” she asked.

“No,” he said simply. “But I ate the apples the first night I was here. I am sorry I lied, but you would have kept me from it. I know you will never leave her, and now I cannot, either. I do not wish to. I will never leave you. In any gray city, I will stand by you, and you will not be alone.”

Oubliette threw back her disheveled head and laughed. “I ate the plantains that night, too, that first night you were here.”

Seven squeezed her hand, and gave over the coin to the ferryman without looking at it, without weighing it in his palm. Idyll frowned and turned it over in his hands. His forehead was creased with concern and disapproval, but he allowed the child to be tucked into his bony arm. Zmeya and the twins held each other up in the midst of the fourteen lights, and they kissed their daughter over and over.

As the ferry drifted off from the shore of eyes, Aerie smiled faintly, and pressed her cheek to the serpent’s.

“Don’t worry, my dear, I know just where to take her. And I will tell your brother that you are beautiful still.” She looked around, and back toward the beachhead and the distant houses. “And not alone in the least.”

As they watched, the goose-woman’s waist cinched itself in, a thickening band of red appearing like a bloody fog—and by the time it seemed solid enough to touch, she was gone. The ferry drifted beyond the mist, leaving them alone on the dock, grim and grieving as a funeral.

In the Garden

The boy clasped her hands in his. The moon was so high and bright that it scrubbed their faces in silver like an industrious nurse-maid. A stiff wind lashed the poplar branches, and the cattails rattled their woody cacophony. The girl sat in the midst of her wood, as red in her cloak as the first sun of winter.

"What happened to the child?" he cried. "Where did Aerie take her? Was she beautiful when she grew up? A warrior like all Zmeya's other daughters?"

The girl laughed, her smile broad and glad in the night, starlight dancing on her lap, her dark eyelids rippling slightly, like the surface of the little Garden lake. The boy blushed, and the girl thought that she liked that best of all, when he could not contain how much he wanted to hear her speak, when he broached his etiquette in eagerness. The blue night shone on his cheeks in patches, and his breath was frosted in the air. Somewhere behind them, a fish jumped and splashed down with a tinkling noise.

"If you will return to the Garden, and to me, I shall tell you, and things even more strange and wonderful." She grinned.

The girl pulled the bird of pearl from the folds of the black wolf tails and tugged on its sapphire tail. It chimed out the midnight hour, long and clear and sweet.


The Book
of the
Scald

In the Garden

It was snowing in the Garden.

This was not unheard-of—surely in the books of the Sultan there was a woodcut of ladies in fur collars cavorting in the snow, little bell-strung dogs leaping at their feet. Some few flakes had even fallen when the girl was young, but certainly not this, not a blizzard which sunk men into ice to their knees. Frost had not gilded the leaves of the lemon trees in so long that even the oldest of noblewomen doddering in her bed could only dimly recall what color her dog might have been, and the sound of his jangling bells. Yet the lake had frozen into a reed-rimmed mirror, and the pine needles were sheathed in ice, glittering cold and quiet. Children cavorted; dogs leapt. New woodcuts were hurriedly pressed.

The chestnut boughs were frozen in place, and the wedding was set for the longest night of the year, so that the feast could last as long as possible. Beasts from far-off places were brought to the Palace to be roasted, and the boy sniffed at plates of rhinoceros, crocodile, camel, bear, and hippopotamus. He wondered glumly what would be served at his wedding. He was tired of being clucked over by seamstresses who seemed only to discuss how much he had grown; and how broad his chest would be in a few years. Needles glittered in their mouths like ice.



In all the delight at the snow, the Garden was blazing with candles and colors, as the Palace yearned to touch and taste the stuff for themselves. The kitchen maids stuck out their tongues to catch flakes, and young men brought frozen oranges to their lovers. Skirts of violet and emerald swished over the paths; shoes of clattering horn and oiled stag-skin spoiled the perfect white with footprints, like ink scrawled haphazardly upon a page of new paper. Among all of these the boy sometimes thought he saw the girl—but there were so many black-haired girls in the Palace, and each time he rounded a hedge or a clay bowl of winter lilies or a bare plum tree, following a stream of dark curls, there was only a pretty, rouged child with jewels on her forehead. He could not often bring himself to even apologize.

But he was sure she would come again. He knew it. The flat sky filled with drifting snow and it melted on his scalp, but he felt no cold. She was there, in



the Garden, somewhere, and so he was happy enough, sure that just around the next drift she was waiting for him. When she had disappeared before, he was sure she had abandoned him, but now—had he not heard the tale of Seven and Oubliette? Did he not know himself as true a friend as the one-armed boy? Did he not know her as wild and lovely as the huldra? His faith only faltered a little, like a larch bending in a stiff wind, as the winter wore on, and the snow did not melt, and she did not appear. He chased drafts of black hair like rabbits, and the night of the wedding drew nearer, and she did not appear. Dogs leapt; bells jangled.



Finally, the night before the wedding bloomed lightless, moonless, starless. The only lights in the Garden were high braziers and candles, their flames reflecting blue and white on the sparkling, freezing ground. The boy walked through the chestnut chapel, where everything from altars to aisle was draped in cloths to keep it safe from the frost. And so it seemed that the deepest snow of all lay on Dinarzad's dais. As he passed it, he thought he heard the chime of a little bird, and, his heart leaping, he dashed into the snow to follow it, through bloomless rosebushes and the black husks of pomegranates, through blazing, icy persimmons and knobbled acacias, all the way through the center of the Garden and through it, to the far edge, farther than he had ever run before, to the great silver Gate which ran all around the Palace grounds like a river. The bird chime led him on, and the boy's breath was quick and fast, his brow wet, by the time he reached the filigree Gate, which showed an endless scene that circled the Garden and back again on itself, a scene of a great battle between men and monsters, in which the men had stern eyes of silver and pearl, and the beasts had craven expressions wrought in iron. Braziers capped the Gate every so often, and the wood beyond was dark and deep.





On the monsters' side stood the girl in her red cloak.

In that moment the boy loved his sister for slipping that outlandish thing into his pack—the girl's lips were pale and her eyebrows white

with snow, her long hair strung with flakes like pearls. She held the little jeweled bird with its long blue and gold tail in her hands and did not smile, or raise her eyes. He could not be sure if she was crying, but her breath was warm and misted on the air.

"I do not know any more stories," she whispered.

"What? But you swore to tell me more!"

"There are no more that I can tell."

"But if the tales are over—"

"I did not say they were over. I said I did not know any more." The girl picked at the pearly beak of her bird.

"I do not understand."

The girl looked up, and the rims of her eyes were red beneath the sweet, inky black of her lids. "I told you long ago that I read the tales of my eyes in cast-off mirrors, or in pools and fountains. I told you that it was difficult, that I could only read one eye at a time, and that I read them backward, slowly, as such tasks will go. I told you stories from the creases of my left eyelid, and my right. I told you all the stories that I could read in those mirrors and fountains and pools. I have told them all. All that remains now are the tales which begin on one eye and end on another, which cross creases and lashes and twist over each other—these tales I do not know, I cannot tell. I cannot close my eyes and yet still read them in the water, or in the glass. They are hidden from me."

The boy opened his mouth, and closed it again. "But I want to hear more!" he cried.

The girl smiled, a long, slow smile he had never seen before. "Will you tell me a story, my prince? Will you read from my closed eyes and let me rest my throat, let me hear the last things which are written upon me?"

"But… I can't do it. I can't tell them the way you can. I'm not like you, I don't know how to tell a tale, I don't know how to speak in all those voices."

"It is all there, already. Please. I want to hear them. I want to know what is waiting on my skin, waiting to be told, waiting to be heard. I have told you so many things—tell me a story, if you are my friend."

The boy was blushing furiously. By the firelight he laid out his own cloak on the stiff, ice-scrimmed snow, and gave the girl a tiny vial of orangewine and a slice of hippopotamus, which they agreed was not entirely pleasant, and tasted

something like chewed mud and river-water with a honey glaze. Finally, the boy leaned forward, until their noses were almost touching. He could see, as once before, the lines and letters of her eyes, and the closer he looked into the black, the more the words swam up to greet him, submerged alphabets and sigils. He became dizzy; he closed his own eyes, and righted himself like a little ship tossed on a violent ocean. He looked again, and the letters were still there, floating, serene. His voice was high and quavering as he began, unsure and frightened to his marrow to appear foolish before the girl.

"On a blasted plain where the Stars do not look there blew hot winds like bellow-gusts, and scrub sage crawled over white rock." He read slowly, as if first learning his letters. "On this plain hung a great iron cage in a great iron frame, and the wind shrieked through it like a woman cut open on a slab…"

THE TALE OF THE WASTE

THE MOON WAS A MOUSE SKULL IN THE SKY. THE blue of the air was dense and deep, the color of the ocean floor, yet it blazed with heat, and golden stones quavered against the horizon. Three long shadows were cast on the thirsty earth, whose dark cracks forked out in all directions like vines searching for the smallest trickle of water. Three long shadows lay black and sere on that fractured desert. The iron cage threw its bars down to the dirt in disgust. There it met the curious hadow-shapes of a woman and a leopard sitting with her ears bent forward, alert and interested. The woman held her cat on a long silver leash which swung back and forth in the wind. She was wrapped head to foot in heavy black veils that whipped and billowed behind her—only her eyes were naked to the air, yellow as withered lemons, her irises sickly red.

The cage was filled with smoke.

It blew out of wrought bars that had been bent into a crosshatched orb hanging by a chain thicker than a man's waist from its frame. Black and acrid and stinging, it whorled and eddied and spun, caught and caustic. Within the smoke flashed two red-orange eyes, baleful and fringed in fiery lashes, tipped in fiery brows. The circuit of smoke snapped its tail around twice and a body rose partway over the soot, like a mermaid peering through her own scaly tail. Her face was full of fire, and her hair was the root of that exhalation of smoke —it blew and curled away from her dark and flaming features. But the smoke came too from below her waist, for her flesh ended there very much as a mermaid's will, and nothing but blackness and red sparks striking snaked out

where her legs might have been. She was naked, humiliated, her breasts tipped in angry fire, her navel a glowering, ugly ruby, everything that might once have been hers piled up beneath the cage like a funeral offering.



The two women watched each other for some time, like two vultures on a long and lonely branch. The leopard did not stir, except for the occasional wave of her tail across the blighted ground.

Finally, the leopard spoke.

"Who has put you here, friend Djinn?"

The creature thrashed her smoke again, obscuring her blazing eyes. The moon was setting behind her, dry and transparent against the blue, as if it too had been sucked dry.

"That's a nice trick," she hissed, her voice like the snapping of green branches as they first catch flame. "Doesn't the tall one talk?"

The leopard yawned, her whiskers flaring, her pink tongue lolling out before the great cat remembered to put it back.

"Her throat is afflicted, if you'll pardon her. Her name is Ruin, and I am Rend, and we travel together because it suits us to do so. We did not know that these parched wastes were a prison. We did not expect to find such a thing here."

A tendril of smoke unspooled out of the cage toward the veiled woman in something like the shape of a slender hand, three of the fingers circled in flame like a rich woman's rings.

"Please!" cried the leopard. "Do not touch her, you mustn't touch her."

Ruin's tired eyes were soft and sorry, and she raised a hand out of her black robe by way of explanation. It was withered nearly to the bone, the skin as cracked and peeling as the desert, the nails blackened and split. Pieces of her skin were slowly stripping away, blowing back from her crooked fingers in the hot air. She folded her veils over the hand again and looked down in shame. The smoke recoiled and the Djinn drew it back into the hanging cage.

"We would share our food, if you give us reason to pity you, and our water, which is more precious than amber, but you mustn't touch my lady. She is not well." The cat looked wretched, her eyes black and round, her spotted fur twitching under the predations of sand mites.

The Djinn considered, her eyes narrowing. She rubbed her nose with one painted hand—for the palms of her hands were stippled in glowing patterns, swirling in and in on themselves, the incandescent ink tracing scarlet loops where the lines of her hands might have been, if she had any.

"I am Scald," she said at last, "and across six seas and nine deserts, I was one of the three Queens of Kash, and I had a crown of embers."

Rend pawed the soil. "Why are you caged, Scald?"

The Djinn was quiet, her clouds dark and thoughtful. "Across nine seas and six deserts, I laid siege to the city of Ajanabh…"

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON

IN THE CITY OF KASH, THERE ARE SIX PALACES, six Thrones, and six Crowns. Three Queens and three Kings there are, each in their house. I was the Ember-Queen, and my coal-buttressed hall stood at the end of a long boulevard which was lined with Ixora and the Palaces of my sisters, the Tinder-Queen and the Ash-Queen. So too my brothers' fastholds, the Hearth-King, the Kindling-King, and the King of Flint and Steel. When I call them my brothers and sisters, of course I by no means wish to indicate that they are any relation to me—cut this thought from your heart. Monarchs are members of a wide and varied fraternity, and this is all my connection to them.

We are the inheritors of the Kingdom of Kashkash, who was the first of the Djinn. He spun all of the rest of us out of the smoke of his beard, and the black curls flowed over the face of the earth. In the sacred fire of his heart we were first conceived, the immaculate flame. His stare burned forests in their shade and caused even human women, icy of heart and eye though they are, to swoon before his majesty. As his wispy children cavorted around him on the plains of the world, he exhorted them to follow him, dancing before them, as he led them into glory and might.

He told us that we had no need to build cities as the rest scrambled to do, but that cities would build themselves around us, for what man did not need fire? Thus he stood at the center of Shadukiam in the days before it knew that name. The whole of the city swirled up around him, all those roses, all those diamonds! Djinn followed him wherever he bade, into that glittering city and

out again, and still his name is holy among us, incandescent, radiant. He was beautiful. He was loved, for in his beard were wonders lesser Djinn could not dream of, lamps and jewels and scrolls of flame and cloud, which he would pluck from his body and distribute like bread. He danced on the minaret tips of our first real homes and cried poetry to the blood-riddled sunsets, cried ho! For the thousand-year holocaust of the Djinn! And far below the rabble screamed their adoration. Of how many Kings in those days did Kashkash grant the wishes? How many maidenheads did he burn clear through? We named this city for him, and even human virgins anoint their foreheads with ashes in mourning, all these centuries hence.

This is what we tell to the world, with horns of brass and carnelian. So I was told; so I believed while I grew, a child in the city of Kash, wishing for golden bells for my belt and sweet honey for my supper. Thus we have told the world for century upon century. In my own time, my smoke-hair snaked and spiraled so long and so far that I had to carry it at my hips in two baskets of woven silver, and the other children laughed at me, until their parents admonished them—for such a mark meant that I would be Queen, just as the great beard of Kashkash marked him as King. I was taken away from my little house, taking with me three sets of golden spoons and a very nice samovar, and was initiated into the strange world of royalty. I was ten years of age, but among my people this is a respectable middle age. We do not age, but we die out rather more quickly than other folk. We flash and spark and die. Those who are pressed by seals and trickery into lamps and suchlike live longer, nigh on forever, as a coal will live if not struck alight. And as a coal is not alive, so a Djinn confined is not. This is the choice we make: Once in the open air and burning, ah, we never last long. Thus at ten I was no child—but my crown was young as a weeping orphan without a breast.

The Ash-Queen and the Hearth-King, Kohinoor and Khaamil, escorted me into the Alcazar of Embers, each of them carrying one of my baskets. I thought they were terrifying and beautiful, with burning gems set into their black skin and burning gold rings in their noses. Kohinoor was tall and thin as a hermit, all black smoke without a single spark in her, while Khaamil was smaller and fatter, lovely folds of flaming skin undulating, cradling a huge topaz in his

navel. He had but one golden eye, the flame in it dancing like a dervish. The other socket was empty and burned black.

In the center of a red tile floor lay a banked and glowing bowl of coals, the symbols of my office. The Queen sat me down on a purple cushion—I balanced gingerly on my smoke, so as not to burn the tassels. She spoke firmly and kindly as she was able, being a woman of no small position, and too busy to care for an upstart new Queen. They had both of them been fonder of the old Queen, who had simply gone up in flames at a family dinner the previous winter, to the mild surprise of all present.

"Now, young one," said Kohinoor, firmly putting me in my place, for she was nearly fifteen, a daunting age, "it is not appropriate that you should reign and remain ignorant of our history. Thus it is our duty to tell you how things were in the old world, and how they came to be. However, we have a luncheon appointment with the Kindling-King, and he is serving blackened basilisk, which is our favorite, so kindly pay attention so that we are not forced to repeat ourselves…"

THE TALE OF THE FIRST DJINN

No doubt you venerate Kashkash as your grandfather and best-loved household god. Stop. At this very moment.

It is necessary for the glorification of the Djinn, and also so that we may not be endlessly ensorcelled into various kitchen items for the purpose of granting the wishes of fishmongers' daughters, that the name of Kashkash be adored and feared. Do not rub that lamp, darling, lest Kashkash leap out and swallow you whole! Do not clack your spoons together, sweetling! Kashkash will come billowing out of the handles and gobble you up! It is, however, not sensible to expect others to adore and fear what we do not, and so the secret history of the smoke-fiends is known only to a select few, of which you are now a member. It keeps the Djinn in terror of their monarchs, and the world in terror of the Djinn.

Shut your mouth, dear, it does not do to attract moths.

Kashkash was not the first Djinn—that poor, benighted soul has no name that any may recall, being the unwanted child of the fires that the Stars conflagrated when they walked through the first lands of the world. Every scorched thing spat out a Djinn like the pit in a cherry, and we had to find our way, even though we burned and burned and could not cool. We are nothing but charred, forgotten children whose birth was utterly unnoticed. I am a child of the Djinn who rose up from the scalded grasses. Khaamil is the child of the seared winds. The Queens kept their counsel and their records, though Kashkash wished all knowledge of our origin destroyed in the fire of his name.

Now that you are one of us, we shall have to look into your pedigree. Kashkash was not the first, then, though many might now say he was. For it is not only the common Djinn who pray in the name of Kashkash, but many preening priests and men of rank who know the truth in their boiling hearts, but take delight in telling the tale of a Djinn like Kashkash, who could have any woman, destroy any man.

Kashkash was indeed powerful, and fashioned his smoke into waving, fiery shapes to terrify us in our infancy, colored as no other Djinn had done, in blue and green and violet. To see him was extraordinary, they say, and we do not argue, at least in this. Around his head waved these airy flames, proud and strutting, proud and vain. So too is it true that he was present in the early days of the city which would come to be called Shadukiam. He dragged his flaming heel around the perimeter of that dung-spattered clearing that could hardly be called a shantytown in those days, when the long boulevard on which your Alcazar sits was nothing but a red dust-run. The place which Kashkash marked out in the mud was quickly dwarfed by the endless growing roads and markets of the Rose City. We built nothing, as he instructed us, but stole and wished our first settlement into life. Kashkash told us that no one of the Djinn could wish as he could, and thus wishing which he did not approve was outlawed. The great talent of the Djinn is in wishing, and of it we made a science after he passed from the world, though it has, in its turn, passed out of its keenest use since children have ceased trapping us in lamps and spoons. In those days we were young, we could not do it very well, but he could do little better: He wished for a palace of cedar and horn, and up rose the ramshackle towers of the Quarter. But oh! What he promised us! When he learned better, learned more! When he had made enough Kings his slaves, what he would build us then! How long he could stretch our lives—we would no longer be candles, briefly lit and briefly snuffed. We would be the flame of ten thousand generations!

He did learn, he did become a prodigy of wishes, but never to us were his talents bent. He loved better anything that was flesh and not smoke—the smallest of these things seemed to him more beautiful than we.

We are not meant to tell outsiders that Shadukiam is not in its entirety the right and province of the smoke-wights. Let the shade of Kashkash take us

with his beard flying. We do not care.

The Quarter Kashkash dragged out for himself became a slum, a place where fire ran in the alleys and crimson teeth flashed in the shadows. Rickety towers were built high through the Rose Dome, until the black tips pierced the spaces between the pale pink petals, and so pressed were we in those turrets that our smoke squeezed through the very walls, our fire shot out from floor to floor, and while Kashkash ate grapes in the governor's house and counseled him to save his coin when the scaffolders came clambering down from their work, the Djinn suffered and wept in their black hovels. He danced on the crumbling tips of the towers with his fires wreathing his eyes and sparking in the stinking wind and cried poetry to the blood-riddled sunsets, cried ho! For the thousand-year holocaust of the Djinn! And far below the tenements screamed their adoration through the squalor.

We lived in this way because Kashkash told us we must, and twirled his beard when he said so. He had the longest beard of any of us, after all. This is why monarchs are determined by such strange criteria. Each of the thrones demands its favorites: the hottest fire, the sweetest voice, and so on. Kashkash claimed his beard gave him sovereignty—should we choose differently? He brandished his beard and with it crushed an entire race into six thin towers. He told us then it was only the beginning, that we would rest soon on carnelian and brass and silk like blue fire, but day and night smeared their way across the Quarter and still we could not breathe for the smoke of another on our faces.

Finally, we could bear it no longer; the terrible smell and the unburied bodies and the decrepit buildings were close all around us. Some few remembered the open grass. What the clerics will not tell you is this: Kashkash was strangled in smoke on the steps of the tenements and his body burned. The towers were torn brick from brick and within a winter no charred stick of the Djinn Quarter could be scried out among the pretty new marble and hanging tapestries. We buried him at the crux of the crossroads of a new city, as far from Shadukiam and the memory of our shame there as it was possible to go. And we wished for nothing, but with our own hands built up a city of carnelian and brass, with couches of silk like blue fire, and paved out in beryl a

long boulevard, along which we raised six Alcazars, one for each of the horrid towers that were.

But guilt rode us like a bull-tamer, and the Djinn built statues over the place where Kashkash had been buried. They swore in his name. They made a secret of what had been done, and named the new city Kash, hoping to avert the anger of his shade and lure some part of the beauty that had been his. To the world we say he was great, and only to ourselves do we whisper: *We are glad rid of him.* We have never seen the furious ghost of his long beard haunt the streets, but no one can say if this is because we keep his name spit-polished. But we wish to be safe in all things, do we not?

Do you understand, little long-hair? May we go now to our luncheon? And if we hear you swear by the name of that thing again we will cut your tongue from your mouth and that will be that.

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

I BLINKED AT THE KING AND THE QUEEN, WHO peered at me like teachers saddled with a particularly dense student. "I… understand," I said. "I suppose a Queen must be ready to hear a great many things she would rather not."

"Quite." Kohinoor snorted.

They showed me through the Alcazar of Embers with a brusque efficiency, eager to leave me alone. Finally, we came to a small room full of statues in every imaginable stone, from lapis to tourmaline. I gaped, I did not know what to say—there were hundreds upon hundreds, each of them draped in glittering shawls and intricately carved with faces, men and women, human and otherwise, Djinn and else, each different from the other as a rose from a turtle.

"What are these marvelous things?" I cried.

The Hearth-King snickered a little. "They are your wives," he said.

Kohinoor rolled her eyes. "Don't be a child, Khaamil. In the years after Kashkash perished, the six monarchs looked to other races to learn the shape of a reign. Human Kings had many wives—why should we not? Are we not greater and wiser and lovelier than men? Yet it had also been long decided by worried priests that no King or Queen of the Djinn should ever be allowed to marry or have children, for the lineage, as you should well know, is not counted from parent to child, and should we bear children like an apple tree bears apples, surely some one of us should be tempted to wrest the throne for their little ones. Thus this rather pretty compromise was reached—we commissioned their carving long ago, and they are passed from monarch to

monarch, both Queen and King, for if the humans count their power with wives, should any Queen of ours be counted less? We have the most delicate, pliant, and quiet wives in the world, more beautiful than flesh, and easier to transport. And more than any human ruler could dream of." She sniffed. "We treat our stone wives with much more care than they treat their warm ones, anyway. I personally dust mine once a week, and I know Khaamil gives them presents when I am not looking. These are yours—they are in your care, and you must be faithful."

With that, they left me alone in my bedchamber, braziers of white-hot coals casting shadows on my hands. I crawled onto my bed, and listened to the breeze through the arched window, trying not to feel hundreds of stone eyes on me until I fell asleep.

I was Queen for one day before I was asked to lead an army.

The Hearth-King sailed into my Alcazar at first light, his smoke trailing behind him like a cape. "It has been decided!" he announced. "We are headed across the nine deserts to Ajanabh, and woe to them when we arrive!"

I poured my hair into my baskets and tried to clear my eyes, to be ready for my first day as Queen. "What?" I put on my best imperious tone. "Why was I not told? Why must we go to Ajanabh?"

"Because of the war, of course."

"We are at war with Ajanabh?"

"Not yet, but when we arrive we certainly shall be."

I clutched my head. "But why? What have they done to us?"

Khaamil smiled, his dark features rippling, streaks of fire playing under his skin. "You must understand, my newest sister, that Ajanabh is a dead city. The spice fields died and it is easy fruit; only a few folk even remain within its walls, and it is a lovely city with a seaport and a river and any number of things. We will make it magnificent again with only a few short and graceful battles."

"But it is so far away! What use is it as a colony?"

Khaamil's smile faltered slightly, his flames flaring white. "There is also, ah, the matter of a holy object which lies in there and which they have refused to give up to us as we have so politely and often asked. Now that the city is dead, there is no reason not to root through the corpse for our property."

"What is it?"

"That is none of your concern!" said Kohinoor, her voice deep and rolling, echoing in my hall like a golden ball tossed from wall to wall. "You are too new to understand, and besides, it is hardly necessary that you know every little part of our minds. The five of us will look after you, never fear. And wait until you see the army we have assembled!"

I was nervous to put on the general's sword so soon after my Ember-Crown, but I could not show them. "Where is the army, then? On the boulevard? In the square? I should like to inspect the troops."

The King and Queen laughed, their expressions delighted and cruel, like children who have played an especially good joke. "They are on the field already, little firefly! Our wish has been approved by the Khaighal, and when the others have arrived, we shall wish ourselves in their midst, and woe betide the Ajan Gate!"

The other three monarchs swept into my Alcazar before I could draw myself up to my full height and demand an explanation: the Tinder-Queen with her long, high-collared orange robes, modest to the last; the Kindling-King with his belt of driftwood; and the King of Flint and Steel, his endless beard tucked into a golden pouch at his waist. Behind them like ghostly winds the six priests of the Khaighal blew in, holding in their hands a fiery book, whose pages were pure white smoke. Their own smoke was equally blanched, and I did not like the look of it at all. These were the men who determined the way of wishing among us—for not a Djinn in the world could wish a thing which Kashkash had not in his time wished; this is hubris which would bring his wrath upon us. In their books was every wish the famous Djinn had ever committed or granted. They were consulted whenever a wish was desired, be it for peasant or lord, woman or Djinn. I do not know of any case of a shade's wrath descending, but the wrath of the Khaighal is terrible, and their hearts toll like bells when a wish not in their books is uttered. Their punishments are fell and feared, and there is no dark corner where a Djinn might utter a wish

they do not countenance, where they will not hear it. They must not know the truth of Kashkash, I thought. They must believe it all, or they would wish for whatever they liked, and who could stop them?

"It has been determined," droned the head priest in a bored tone, "that our lord Kashkash many times wished himself on the field of battle before hostilities began in order to stymie his enemies. Therefore you may wish in his Shadow and his Stead." The new wish was recorded in a different book, old and dusty, with wooden boards and lazily cut pages. It did not flame even a little.

The Kings and Queens of Kash gripped my hands and before I could blink we stood on a wide red plain before a city whose walls were so tall clouds wisped at their heights.

I had never seen such an army. My flames caught in my throat, banked in wonder. Every soldier, if they could be called such, was armored in fabulous metals that glittered in the bloody sun. Their shoulder-plates were flared and fluted, edged in antlers and diamonds, their helmets topped with feathers from birds I could not begin to name. They sat astride war chargers whose chests bulged like boulders, and carried swords that no doubt had endless lineages and cost more than whole towns. The supply carts and pages stretched off in the distance—including six vast carriages carrying our wives like cannonballs behind the artillery—like the audience at a circus, and the hot wind blew back the hair from thousands of craggy, stern, proud faces, faces forged by generations of select nobles courting their select cousins.

In the Bay of Ajan floated dozens of long black ships, and on the beach were dragged dozens more. Campfires glittered on the floor of the plain, which spread out below the high hill of Ajan like a woman's scarlet skirt.

"We have had to call in every wish we have ever granted to gather them," Kohinoor said, her own face set to the wind, the smoke of her skin billowing gray and black. "An army of Kings and Queens; not a pauper in the lot. They owe us, or their father owes us, or their grandmother. Their aunt became eternally young, their foster mother promised her firstborn to pay for the life of her lover. And now they are all here, paying their debt as good breeding will, and never has an army of more beauty been assembled. Some of them are unused to battle, having sat upon cushions and not upon horses, but they have

the finest military minds in the world, and they will find a crack in those walls for us."

"Please. Your Majesty," I said. "Tell me what we seek in this place."

Kohinoor rolled her eyes. "It is a box of carnelian, and in it is a thing which is mine and no other's, which they have no right to keep from me. More than that I will not share with a young upstart with no military experience. Matters of state, you know. Suffice it that we wish to have it. The priests of Kashkash have determined that it is not righteous that we simply wish it out of its hiding place—for what fool hid a thing from the fire-tyrant? But fear not! This city is so weak that you will doubtless hardly know the battle has begun before it is over. Sit back, drink your brandy, and enjoy the sun."

She passed me a vial of brown liquor and I sniffed at it, but did not drink. Instead I drifted down from our little cliff and through the ranks, where Kings and Queens of unpronounceable places groused about their conscription and cursed the Djinn under their breath, or bragged about how much better they would prove at killing than their layabout knights had done. I trailed my smoke behind me and let them choke on it. Why should I be kept out of their councils, kept ignorant of their ridiculous box? Was I not Queen as well as they? So far my throne had gotten me little but a vast, empty house and a closet full of stone wives.

The sky was growing dim as I approached the massive Gate of Ajanabh. The stone of it was red as a girl's hair, red as my own ribs, and as blemishless as any wall I had seen. I wondered if Kohinoor had examined it this closely, closely enough to see it was not easily broached, closely enough to see that the Gate itself was a huge pair of arms crossed over each other, with a worn and weathered face frowning down at the adorned throng.

"Go away," the face said.

I saw what she did not: There was no Gate at all anymore, just this *gargantua* whose shoulders spanned the breadth of what was once the Gate. His belt grazed the rocky earth. His eyes were old and cracked at the edges, bronze-green, his brow beaten leather, his jowls deeply stained with wind and sun, his great arms and hands the red rock of the wall, huge and dry and barnacled, a petrified giant. Moss grew on his knuckles; birds nested in his ears. His voice was slow and slurry as old snow.

“I am sure you think I am impressed with your brigade of strutting swans. I have been here since the pepper plants were taller than stallions in the fields. You will not chisel one flake of stone from me.”

He glared at me and tightened his arms.

“Who are you?” I gasped.

He seemed to consider for a moment. “I am the Guardian of the Gate. I had a name once, but it is no use to call me by it. I am Ajanabh. I surround it and contain it and feel its barges on my back, and so I have become it. It is better to call me Ajanabh than to guess at what my name might have been before I laid my limbs down around this place…”

THE TALE OF THE GIANT WHO STAYED

ONCE AJANABH HAD SAD AND CRUMBLED WALLS, with a gate like a crease in a cheap linen curtain, when I came to work the fields, as my folk often did during the harvest season. The pay is steady, and my shoulders bear those tiny yokes far better than poor, feeble horses—why, I hardly feel it! The streets just began somewhere in the middle of this rocky red plain, and sooner or later if you followed them you came to the spice plantations and then to the city proper.

Lawlessness doesn't mean there's no law, you know, it just means that there are a lot of different laws slugging it out in the streets, and none of them have come out on top yet. Anyone can dole out stocks and nails and a right tap in the gut for infractions of whatever law they take a fancy to, even ones you never heard anything about, so you just learn to watch yourself. Ajanabh was lawless then, which is as good as a wall twice my size.

And so I worked in the red-pepper fields, the black-pepper fields, the green peppers and the pink, and the cinnamon groves, and the coriander fields, and the saffron fields, and the cumin farms, on the salt flats combing and drying the crystals like hard, cutting snow. I pruned and tended the mustard plants, the paprika bushes, and cut vanilla beans from the vine. I crushed them all, endlessly, with my feet in a mortar the size of a galleon. I was happy with my work. Then, Ajanabh smelled so rich and sweet and smoky, all her spices puffing from one window or another as they were rendered, pulverized, and mixed. During the long, warm harvest, when the sun turned the bay into a

great glittering mirror, I pulled spices from the earth—for who does not want their food well flavored? And during the spring I put my back to the plow, and drew furrows deep as a man's legs in the rich soil.

But soil does not stay rich. Who can say why land which gives and gives like a mother with endless sweets in her skirts one day shakes her finger at her babes and denies them?

In my own country we are so careful, we plant only every other season, and we are so large that we digest but slowly, and need only to feast like bears through the summer long every second year. But those feasts! A whale would be embarrassed by our plenty. Goblets bigger than camels' humps, plates the size of shields.

But in Ajanabh they were not so careful, and greedily ground into powder everything the earth could throw up, until she put her hands on her aproned hips and shook her head sadly. No more, she sighed. And there was no more. But such things do not happen all at once. For a long while no one noticed, and the sacks of saffron went out into the world as they had always done. I kept at the plow, even though my heart told me to rest, that there was no use in it. But I loved Ajanabh by then, roving laws, stolen coins, spice-smog and all. I would not leave her. But slowly, in clutches like wild rabbits, the Ajans began to go.

Carrying bags on their backs they went across the plains with squinting eyes, or to the harbor with rum flasks at their hips and oranges to hold against the rotting of their teeth. The bargers went first, since moving downstream for them is as easy as eating. Then the other giants went, following the promise of better fields in the east where they could pull up strawberries and turnips like red and white bouquets. They begged me to go with them.

"The feast is almost here!" they cried. "Where will you find enough mule meat and coconut-wine to satisfy you?"

"Ajanabh will provide for me, and I will sup as well as you," I answered.

Well, I did not sup nearly so well as they, and I cracked my own coconuts down by the bayside, and drank the raw, unfermented milk. It did not really compare. But I did find a mule to roast, left behind by one of the sea-bound families, and I sat on the beach with my driftwood fire snapping like a housecat, and gnawed my mule bones, and sucked my coconuts dry, and it was

not too wretched, really. At least I could still smell that sweet, smoky air, the cumin and the turmeric wafting over the broken walls.

Once while I plowed a near-dead field, I saw a couple clutching a little girl in their arms, and her hardly old enough to walk.

"Simeon!" they hailed me—for everyone knew me by that time, the Giant Who Stayed.

"Hello, small folk," I said warmly, and squatted down so they would not have to crane their necks so much.

"We are bound for Muireann, where the whale fur thatches the roofs, and the roads are paved with mother-of-pearl." Their girl giggled and reached up to me—I gave her my pinkie to hold, as big in her arms as the trunk of a tree her own age.

"I wish you well of it," I said.

"This place is dead. There is nothing for us now; our pepper plants withered and died, and there are no corns for our little girl to grind when she is grown. She will spear seals and narwhal instead, and sleep in a bed made of their spiraling horns! We will bounce our grandchildren on knees chilled by snow and sea—won't that be something!"

I smiled at them. Ajanabh was so warm and wet, it tended to make one forget what snow was—I only dimly remembered breaking through the frost with a shovel to get the bulbs in back home. They walked off, down toward the harbor where the ships bellied up to the dock every day, and left the city that loved them. Sometimes I imagined I could hear Ajanabh weeping, a poor lady distraught that her babies abandoned her when she grew old and dry.

Finally, I put my plow aside, and sat on my last field, knees drawn up to my chest, looking at the city. There were no lights in the houses piled up like red beehives, and no sounds of laws being worked out in the streets. No bells tolled out the hours, there being no one to ring them. My city was empty, and so I decided that no one should really mind if I were to take up my residence there. No one could tell me I was too big anymore, and I would sleep under a blanket of spice-smog, as I had once or twice dreamed, snoring after the giant-feasts of home.

I stepped over the rotted gate, long since claimed by mold and sea air, and into the steep hills and alley-dells of a city which was built up and up, with

streets that jackknifed sharply down and diagonal and straight up and any way they pleased, the cobbles being as lawless as anything else in Ajanabh. I walked with my hands in my pockets, sniffing the air, still delicious and dark as ever, save that the sour smell of people had gone, and left only the spices to scent the night. I grinned, my big teeth like a moon above the city. I tried not to step on anything that wasn't meant to be stepped on—but I had to squeeze, sometimes.

I thought, again, that I could hear my girl, my city, weeping, lost and lonely.

"I'm still here, my lady," I whispered.

But there was something—there was a sound. It wasn't my fool head playing games as it does when the plowing is boring and the sun is high. It was high and piercing and sad as anything, like a voice but not a voice. I had never heard anything so beautiful in all my days—and the giantesses can play the bassoon like nothing you've known, when the mules are fat and the coconut-wine has a good head on it. I followed the sound, careful not to crush anything too much, up and down the weird maze of streets that makes Ajanabh seem all alley, and finally to the center of the city, a little courtyard all humped up in the middle, with a fountain that has green water shooting about like vines and all manner of vines shooting about like water. It's got a little figure in the middle of it, too, which I think is supposed to be the Cinnamon-Star all cavorting in the stream, but her eyes fell out a long time ago, and her knees aren't so good, and I never could tell if she's got the Bark of Plenty in her hands or some old toys the children stuck in there when they got bored with them.

In front of the fountain was a lady, and I was six kinds of shamed to see I was wrong, and ten kinds of tickled that I wasn't the only one who stayed. But she wasn't like any lady I'd seen before. She had a red dress on, not much more than a slip, and she was dancing—but that wasn't too odd. Ajanabh never was poor of dancers and singers and that sort. It was her hands, well, her hands and her hair, but without the hands the hair wouldn't have struck me. She had no fingers at all, but violin bows, fiddle bows, strapped on where her fingers ought to be, and the strips of leather went all around her forearms and up to her shoulders, to keep the bows on tight. Her black hair was stiff as catgut, and she danced so quick and light that it flew out in all directions, long and wide enough that I swear to you that woman was playing her own hair with each hand, five bows together, whipping her head from side to side to change the

length, like a fiddler presses on his frets. With bare feet she slapped the cobbles, her toes all bound in copper rings, and the sound of her playing was the sound I had heard, swift and terrible and lovely.



When she stopped her scales for a moment to oil the bows, I cleared my throat. "I thought you had all gone."

The woman looked up, her eyes green as palm leaves under the ecstatic shocks of hair. "Not all," she said mischievously. "Some of us will never go."

I looked at the beehive-houses, and indeed, in some of those round windows, faces peeked out, looking for the violin-girl, wondering why she had stopped her song.

"My name is Agrafena," she said, and put her bows very gingerly into my great hand. "I am the song of Ajanabh. I am staying, and so are they."

"But who are they?"

The woman spun around on one heel, sending her hair flying again. "We are those who loved this place enough to hold her hand through death, and watch her come out the other side. We stayed to record her dying, each in our way, painters and poets and calligraphers, singers and dancers and violinists, sculptors and acrobats, jewelers and jugglers, glassblowers, pantomimes, orators, and toy-makers, novelists and layers of mosaics, mask-makers and players of scenes. We stayed. We wrote and painted and chiseled and sang her death, and we have found, now that the crowds have gone, that like a fallen tree, she has enough for us, we mushrooms and mosses, we spiders and glowworms. The dancers tamp down the seeds in our little city gardens, and there are carrots and blackberries enough to feed us. The lion-tamers find little clutches of cattle preposterously easy work, and there is meat enough to fill us. We take empty houses and apartments, parlors and sitting rooms, and there are more than enough—there are few locks in Ajanabh these days. An empty city is a paradise, and here all Vstreychas now end. There is even a wine-maker who stayed to press out the last vintage, the famed cardamom wine which is now ours alone to savor."

I hung my head. "Then I am sad, Agrafena, for I stayed, and yet I know no art but the pounding of paprika and the cutting of vanilla beans. I can give

nothing to the new Ajanabh, except my bulk, which is not welcome."

She turned her head to one side, as if sizing me for a new pair of shoes. "Poor Simeon! Our last giant! But if you are willing, and if you love your city, I know a thing you can do which is harder than any of the little acts we perform in her name."

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

"SHE TOLD ME," THE GREAT GATE SAID POINTEDLY, "that now that Ajanabh had not so many laws prowling her streets, and not so much wealth with which to throw on armor when needed, sooner or later, folk would come who did not juggle or sing, but carried things bright and sharp, swords and arrows and others besides." He glared at me with his brass eyes. "She bade me stretch myself as far as I could and lie around my city so that she would be safe. I worried about my skin, as surely these sharp things will be flung at me in the hurly-burly, and I should not make a very good wall then. But she calmed me with her sweet bows and called to her side stonemasons and brass-workers and tanners, and directed them to shore me up on all sides with red rock and brass buckles and leather straps, so that I should be a proper Gate, and safe withal. I went to the outside of my city, and kissing her topmost turrets, bent back my legs as far as I could, and stretched up through my ribs as tall as I could, until my ankles met and my head cast a shadow on the courtyard, and not a few pelicans dropped fish into the salt sea in surprise at such a sudden mountain in their midst. Then I crossed my arms, and closed up the Gate of Ajanabh, which is who I am now, and not Simeon any longer."

I bit my lip. "But if there are only artists inside—"

"They will all be slaughtered. We have an armorer, an old water rat living in a leaky garret with dozens of empty suits lining his wall—but what are dozens to your assembled horde?" His smile was hard and cruel. "But never you worry

about it, you drafty old thing. No sword will pass my fingers, and they will be safe. Ajanabh will provide for them."

"I did not want to come," I muttered sullenly. "No one asked me, they just whisked me here and put a cup of brandy in my hand."

"That will hardly make us feel better," the Gate huffed.

I turned the flaming rings on my fingers. Something within me longed to see the corkscrewed streets of Ajanabh, longed to hear Agrafena's bows slide through her hair. I had been Queen only a day and seen nothing at all but my own house. I did not want to put a torch to that place, any more than I had wanted to hear that Kashkash was wicked or that I was only Queen because of my hair.

Suddenly, I reached out and clutched at the Gate's massive stone finger, which was like a long temple pillar in my hands. "Let me in!" I begged. "Let me see the city. Perhaps I can convince them to leave. Perhaps if I can find that ridiculous carnelian box, they will take it and go, and be glad to lose no one to a battle."

The Gate squinted, his brass eyes crusted with verdigris, suspicious. "How do I know you are not intent on some sabotage? You are a Djinn. I would sooner trust a starving crocodile who wishes to mind my mule than a Djinn."

Color and flame flared in my cheeks. "How should I trust a giant not to crush me in his fingers because a fly was buzzing at his ear?" I banked my fires. "But come, you must see that I am young. I was only made Queen yesterday; I know nothing of this place, or this war. Let me in, and I will try to find what they want, and bring it out to them with no bloodshed. If I am lying, I will wish it all back for you, and damn the Khaighal."

The Gate frowned, his mouth lines deep and clogged with clay. "I will let you in. For one night. You must be again at my fingertips by dawn or I will not let you out, and you will discover that actors and singers are often forced into rather more unsavory lines of work, and they are not out of practice. No one who lived in Ajanabh-of-old lets their muscles soften for even a moment." I nodded furiously. "Swear by your wish-wrangling King, swear by Kashkash the bold and his brazen beard, and I will believe you," he grumbled.

I could make that promise, but it would mean nothing to me, not anymore, not now. Slowly, I gripped the sides of my silver hip-baskets and said, "I will

swear by him, but also by the Cinnamon-Star, and the Snake-Star, and the Seven Sisters."

Grudgingly, he nodded, and lifted his forefinger from his middle finger, exposing just enough space for me to gather my smoke and seep through. "Go to the fountain, and find Agrafena. She is always there this time of night, fiddling up the moon. She will take you to a room with rafters so high you will think it is open to the night, and an ivory cage, and a flame like your own."

I thanked him and, holding my baskets close, drifted through his fingers and into the red city.

In the Garden

THE BOY STOPPED.

"You're doing fine," said the girl warmly. She put out her hands to take his, and opened her eyes. They sparkled in the firelight, and the snow in her hair had melted to dew. "Shall I bring you dinner tonight"—she laughed—"and run to escape my sister?"

"It feels strange, to speak to you, when I am so used to listening. This is how it is in the stories I knew before you—a beautiful girl sits at the feet of a boy and treasures his every word. But it does not seem right."

"This is still my story," said the girl, drawing away. "My last story. It is not yours simply because it sits in your mouth awhile."

"I know! Oh, please do not be angry. I know. And I am afraid. I shall read as slowly as I can. It is your story, and it will take you away from me at the most beautiful part. Just when I want nothing more than to read it forever, it will be over. I know it."

She smoothed his hair, but could say nothing. "At least I can rest. I had become so tired, like a little place had opened in me and all of me had fallen out of it."

"How can you be so tired by only reading? Are you sick?"

"No, but that is the way of it. I told you it was my story. Even now you draw it out of me like a fisherman draws a carp from a lake. It thrashes and bucks as it is dragged from the water, but the sun on its scales is so golden!"

The boy's eyes widened, and he looked at her again, how flushed her cheeks in the cold, how thin her arms, how the black of her eyes seemed to burn like pitch. He was a little frightened of her, and she was so strange—he had almost forgotten how strange she had seemed to him in the beginning, how strange she was still, and how unlike any of the girls whose black hair he had chased around the trunks of trees.







"Are you tired now? Would you like me to leave you?" he whispered.

And she came back to him, her face warm and wide and winsome as an eager cat. "No, please. I want to hear more. I want to hear how Scald found the city of artists. How odd it feels to not know what happens next!"

He laughed ruefully and passed his braceleted hand over her eyes, closing them gently. The letters danced. He read, slowly as ever, his uncertain voice sounding in the snow like a hare's footprints.

"I followed the Ajan streets as I was told, and they were steeper and sharper and narrower even than I had imagined. But they whirled inexorably toward a center, and the moon was not even above the brow-ridge of the Gate before I found the fountain, and the dancing, fingerless maid…"

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

SHE WAS YOUNGER THAN I HAD THOUGHT—SHE must have been little more than a girl when Simeon had first found her. She was full-grown and then some now, just over the crest of life, laughing lines at her eyes and a deep, weathered color to her brown skin. She played with both hands upon her stiff, wiry hair and her red slip snapped crisply around her as she plied her practiced steps. The song was not the dirge for a city that the Gate had heard, but something sly and serpentine, staccato and sure, something that wound and writhed, something knowing, something hidden to all but her. I waited; I would not interrupt.

She finally stopped, bent at the waist, her foot pointed and poised in the air. Without moving any other muscle so much as a twitch, she turned her head to the side and winked at me. The Gate was wrong—her eyes were far greener than palms, glittering with a weakly burning light I thought I recognized—but no, it was not possible. She looked me up and down, and a secretive smile unfolded on her lovely face.

"You're Djinn!" I cried, pointing like an accusing child. "No wonder that hair can play! How do you get it to stiffen like that?"

Agrafena laughed, a gravelly sound like coals raked over. "No more than a quarter, I'm afraid, and on the paternal side—more's the pity." Her eyes flashed their dim fire at me. "We do not all lie on silk cushions in the vaults of Kash, you know. And like me, the hair is only a quarter smoke. Enough to be reasonable when I treat it nicely."

“But how? It is absolutely forbidden to mate with humans! After Kashkash died they forced us to agree to it—so many were crushed into spoons and lamps that day! There were too many ruined maids and inoperable boys for them to countenance. There has not been a half-breed for centuries! Longer!”

“Thank you for using such a generous word for me. But as I said, I am not half-anything, I am a solid and smoky quarter-breed, and if you wish to arrest someone, you shall have to dig up my grandparents, and I am sure they would be very cross about it.”

I did not know what to say. She was an impossibility. At home she would be burned immediately and that part of her which was inflammable sunk to the bottom of the sea. Such was the contract the Khaighal witnessed; such was the contract men made us sign with regard to their prettiest children. I finally settled on the simplest thing I could summon up.

“The Gate sent me,” I said.

“Simeon? It will be time for his mules soon, I should think. Is he asking you to call him Ajanabh yet? Silly old farmer, but a better soul you never knew.”

“I am from the army outside. The army of Kings and Queens that is waiting to flatten this place.”

Agrafena’s face darkened, and even a quarter-Djinn can go very dark. “Yes, I know which one you mean,” she rumbled.

“I came within the walls to find what my siblings seek: a little carnelian casket, no larger than my arm.”

“Your siblings?”

I drew my smoke up and the jewels of my waist flashed. “I am the Ember-Queen.”

Agrafena just laughed and scratched her scalp. “And what is in this box?”

“I… I don’t know.”

“Well, the Queenship of Kash is not what it used to be.”

“I have been Queen for a single day!” I protested. “They tell me nothing! I was lucky to learn there was a box at all!”

“Well enough, well enough. I have no idea where such a thing might be. I have seen nothing of the sort—carnelian is common to your country, not ours.”

“The Gate—Simeon—told me you would take me to a tall room, and an ivory cage, and a flame like mine.”

Her eyebrows arched. “Did he now? Well, I suppose I know what he means. I doubt you’ll find your box there, though. More likely bird droppings and an earful of prattle.”

“Nevertheless.”

“Of course—who am I to shirk the duty of entertaining visiting royalty? Follow me; it is not far.”

We moved quickly through the angled alleys, and the shadows were deep and scented below the rounded towers of Ajanabh. I thought I could smell that spice-smog that Simeon had loved so, or the ghost of it, the faintest sigh of cardamom and cumin and cinnamon breathing through the night. As we passed windows and doors, I could see jugglers throwing candelabra high in dimly lit rooms, and hear heartbreaking soliloquies delivered earnestly to tall mirrors. The night was full of voices, and every now and then, a lone and tamed lion would pad by on the cracked road, his collar kept clean and crisp. Surely there was a great ring somewhere, a great stage, and I was missing even now the Ajan carnival in its full waxing. We passed through a wide square peopled with red sandstone statues, each face precise and perfect in scarlet stone, clutching granite mirrors and marble parasols. We wound through them on tiptoe, for I was certain one of them would reach out at any moment to grip my arm. But the violin player walked tall and did not err in her steps, even when the stone crowd was far behind us. Agrafena’s hair stood straight out behind her even when she was not whirling about, and I could not see her face for its mass. I suppose I was not one to talk, with my ungainly baskets.

Shyly, I ventured: “Your hands…”

“Yes?”

“How did you come to have your bows? It must have been very painful.”

“Not so much as you might think.” She stopped and though we could not fit through the alleys abreast, she looked over her shoulder at me. “We have time yet in your night before we reach the roost, if you are genuinely curious—”

I nodded eagerly. She drew me out of the little alley and sat me beside a persimmon tree caught up in a rusty iron trunk-gate, to protect it from climbing children.

“Well enough, then. I have told you already that my grandfather was a Djinn…”

THE VIOLINIST'S TALE

HE WAS BORN IN KASH, LIKE THE REST OF YOU. His cradle was carnelian and brass. His smoke was bilious and soot-riddled, even as an infant, and his eyes dripped orange flame when he cried out for his mother. My grandfather, whose name was Suhail, was dissatisfied by the silent finery of Kash, however, and chafed against the Khaighal, which was the life charted for him by the best astrologers. He wanted to find a princess with a wicked wish for a dark and handsome stranger to whisk her away and sing to her on a balcony surrounded by swans and imps.

So that is just what he did.

My grandmother had a long braid the color of fire, and very green eyes. As all folk know, this coloring indicates a deviant and difficult disposition, and indeed, she spent her nights at her tapered window, wishing for a dark and handsome stranger to come and whisk her away from a boring life of embroidery and afterbirth, and sing to her on a balcony surrounded by swans and imps. She was not entirely sure what she meant by singing, but in her books, suitors always sang to their ladies, and she was determined to hear a song for herself, even if it did seem a little dreary. My grandmother, whose name was Glaucia, laced her dress very tightly and sighed loudly at her window, just as the woodcuts in her books always depicted such ladies.

My grandfather, lately run off from Kash with a silk sash like blue fire, heard her sighing and needed no Khaighal to grant her wish. He obliged her

most vigorously, and the swans trumpeted, and the imps snickered, and Glaucia discovered that singing was not so very dreary after all.

As it tends to do, time produced a child, a daughter with green eyes and very polite, soft black hair that never—not even once!—snaked out to strangle a parrot in flight. Suhail did not know what to do. He could not send her to be educated properly in Kash, for they would burn her and drown her in short order, and universities tended to also ask for pedigrees. But she was a mild and sweet girl, to the astonishment and consternation of both her parents, and she found a mild and sweet boy to build her a house, and was happy enough for someone who couldn't even strangle a parrot properly.

Her only unhappiness was that her marriage could not be consummated. Whenever her husband drew up the covers over them both—oh, how Glaucia rolled her eyes when her daughter recounted that!—and reached for her, the poor girl's body melted into black smoke, every bit as oily and soot-riddled as her father's. Her husband fell right into her and found his face pressed into his own pillow. There was no end to the weeping and storming in their little house.

But it seemed not to matter, for she came down with child just like any other woman, and in the usual span produced me, whose hair immediately throttled the nearest turtledove, to the relief and joy of my grandfather, who burst into grateful and incendiary tears at the sight.



My parents settled in Ajanabh and put down a modest basil field. Everything in my childhood smelled of basil, soapy and green. But I did not love basil, nor the few small squares of garlic my father put into the ground. I loved music, and I sang before I spoke. This delighted my grandmother when she visited. She did not mind that my voice sounded much more like a rabbit roasting alive in a crackling hearth than sweet tiralees. But I would not give up, and when my grandfather brought me a fiddle of lava rock with a long, thin blue flame for a bow, I threw my arms around his black and bilious neck and squeezed until he could not breathe. I learned that fiddle like some children learn their figures—it was as simple and easy to me as adding up a column of numbers and presenting the tidy, graceful sum at the bottom of the page. My mother said I

played too fast, and my father said that true virtuosos certainly did *not* dance that way while they played, but I would not stop, or slow.

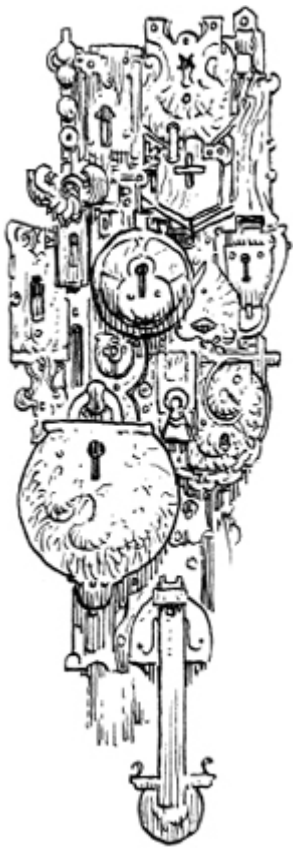
At last, when the basil fields were still high and bright and green, I reached the limit of my abilities. I could not play faster, or sweeter, I could not move my fingers in more complex patterns. My parents thought I would be satisfied then, to be the best I could, but my grandfather winked at me on his winter visit, and I knew my hands were not yet happy. Once the family had feasted and were snoring in four-part harmony I crept from the farmhouse and into the city proper, which was then as lawless as a ship without a brig. I sought out the cottage of Folio, who was the author, so they said, of every wonder in Ajanabh.

Her door was a menagerie of locks. Every possible type and size, from huge brass bolts to tiny, intricate silver keyholes no wider than a needle, wooden locks with gaping slots and golden locks with birds carved into their faces, iron locks and crystal locks and copper locks and locks so old and worn that only rust was left where the metal might once have been, bronze locks and locks fashioned out of antlers, crude slate locks and locks in the shape of open, staring eyes blown from purest, clearest glass.

I had no key, and there was no spare splinter of door left on which to knock. Being a clever child, I pressed my fingers into ten varied locks, no two of the same stuff, and heard a dozen little bells cascade their chimes through the hunched hut, alone among the campaniles of Ajanabh a short, squat, stairless shack. The door creaked open in just the manner one would expect a mysterious door to creak, and the light within was rust-colored, reeking of oil and copper and burnt air. I stepped gingerly inside; the door behind me swung closed, the locks merrily going about their slotting and turning.

Folio sat at her workbench, an old fig-wood plank with vises set into it and open books lying brazenly a-splay. There were sketches on the walls, and scraps of metal in various states of molten and hard leaning against chairs and baseboards or puddled in molds; loose gears and pendulums and countless clocks, their innards violently exposed, metronomes endlessly ticking away; and many things whose use I could not guess: machines of metal precious and

cheap, black with oil or draped in cloth, metallic wings and pens which wrote hurriedly with no hand to guide them, little clockwork lumberjacks who chopped ineffectually at iron stumps, and a spinning wheel whose spindle whirled contentedly all on its own.



Folio had a hunchback and skin the color of fig seeds, and her spectacles—for it is well known that all inventors wear spectacles—were fashioned from clock hands which stuck out every which way from the round glass. Behind them, her dark blue eyes, the color of good dye, were luminous and calm. She was rather old and her white hair, braided in tiny strips, hundreds upon hundreds of them, piled onto each other like bridge ropes. Her lips were thin and almost blue from pressing them whilst deep in thought, and her hands, those famous hands, had eight joints each. Her nails were very short, but her spidery hands were so delicate, plying gently a little copper sphere that spun over a fountain of steam.





"It's a pretty toy for a dull child, but I've been thinking about a mechanical horse," she said happily, her voice crisp as clockwork. "But you surely do not care much about horses, even if they could be made of silver and weep fire from their eyes."

I shrugged. "My grandfather weeps fire."

"Well," she said archly, looking up from her spinning ball, "it wouldn't be the same thing at all. My horses would have a weeping switch that you could turn on and off. Young people are so hard to impress these days."

"I am sure they would be wonderful. They say you make all the wonderful things in the world."

"That is certainly a lie. Such strange birds folk are—make a few flying machines, purely by commission, and everyone starts telling stories about you. Which is of course what brought you here—come to buy a wonder, I presume."

I blushed a bit. "Not to buy, I'm afraid. I haven't any money."

"To beg a wonder, then. And what sort of miracle am I expected to produce for free from behind my ear?"

"My violin, madam. I wish to play it as no one has played a violin before."

"Practice," she humphed.

"I can already play better than a Satyr plays her pipes," I said hotly. "But *you* should understand. What does the world need with a mechanical horse when every farmer has his own old gray nag? Who needs a horse made of silver, weeping fire? No one—but you'll make them anyway, one day or another. I would be to other violinists as your horse will be to a bent-back dapple with flies in her nose!"

She glanced at my fingers. "Very well said, girl. I think perhaps we can do something for you, but we will have to consider it for a while. I did not think

of the horse until I watched the ball spin—who knows where I may find your wonder?"

I swallowed hard. "I should rather stay, madam, and help where I can."

"I do not need an apprentice, nor am I a hospice."

"Of course not! I didn't mean to say—"

There was a rummaging, clanking sound from behind a large stone furnace, and what spit a girl whose blood is a quarter fire can claim dried in my mouth. An extraordinary thing emerged from behind the furnace: a woman all of silver and bronze, whose body was a mass of gears and bolts and plates, with no flesh at all on her, only metal, endless metal, and her eyes were two rolling balls of gold. She had no hair, silver or otherwise, but an oblong head all spiked with joints and gears. Her hands ended in long, many-knuckled fingers, just like Folio's. The inventor turned to the creature and smiled fondly.

"Hour, darling, you know you're not supposed to come out when company is present."

The silvery woman turned and began to burrow behind the furnace again, pulling a dropcloth over her head and piling scrap on her shoulders. Folio laughed.

"We can still see you, Hour."

"All right, Mother," came a muffled, curiously flat voice. A bronze hand flashed out and dragged a large wing of tin plates over itself.

"No, darling, come out; you've spoiled your hiding already." There was a great clatter as she emerged again and the scrap fell to the flag-stone floor. She stood there, hanging her head. Gears whirred softly.

"I am sorry I came out. But she has bad hands," said the bronze woman, and her unmuffled voice was peculiar, something between a clock chime and a whetstone spinning.

Folio turned her eyes, but none of the rest of her, and looked at my hands. "Not everyone can be so blessed as we," she demurred.

"She has bad hands," the woman repeated. "Fix her hands. Violins and bows go together, not violins and hands."

"Interesting!"

"Madam Folio!" I cried in alarm. "What is that thing?"

"She is *not* a thing, thank you very much! She is to a person what my horse will be to a nag, what you would be to a violinist. Kindly show a little respect—and don't you go telling anyone either, or there'll be no end to the outlandish strangers who will come fingering my locks for miracles."

"How can you have made such a thing, that talks and walks?"

"You believe with all your smoky little heart that I can make you a virtuoso, but you wonder at this smallest of things? I made her; she is my daughter. There is nothing simpler in the world than that…"

THE TALE OF THE ROOSTER-MAKER'S DAUGHTER

WHERE I GREW UP, THE SEA SOMETIMES FREEZES.

Just the edges, mind you, like a puddle freezes, from the edge-side in. The waves would go so cold that their foam came tinkling down in a shower of ice, and the beaches were hard and clear as glass. When I was a girl, I would collect the foam shards like shells, but no matter how quickly I hurried back to my house with its wide porch, I would come to the door clutching a pail of water and nothing more.

My father had a very fine house. The whole dwelling was full of white curlicues and delicate fluting, breaking over the face of the house like frozen foam. But the walls were thick and solid, as they had to be, for it was cold in Muireann, as often cold as Ajanabh is hot.

When I was not trying to ferry ice from the sea to my bedroom, I was *fiddling,* as my mother called it. My father did not think there was very much odd about a child *fiddling,* as he was a *fiddler* himself, by trade, and *fiddling* had bought our curlicued house. He worked with four other men and women in Muireann at a peculiar export which, not being fish, was not much noticed among the other products of the great seaside city. Between the five of them, they produced the most extraordinary clockwork roosters that crowed out the morning with golden beaks. This was their summer crop. In the winter they trolled the oyster beds and carved the tropical birds of their dreams from the pearls. My father made the eyes, which flicked open and shut—not by any mechanism, you understand, simply by eyelids that rolled back and forth as

you turned the little golden bird in your hands. His was a simpler trade than mine—but that is the way of parents and children.



My mother was a poet, who wrote long, dreamy stanzas about broken masts and hungry seas. Once she spent a year recording every shade of gray that the palette of the Muireann sky produced. She cried out her poems at the harborfront, and young girls threw pennies at her feet. She threw up her hands like pennies when I *fiddled,* but once, just once, she held her hands in the freezing well water for hours and hours, and then, running to the sea and back again, brought me in her blue and shaking fingers one perfect shard of foam.

My father let me have a few of the finished roosters, and I took them apart in my room when I ought to have been sleeping, until my floor was full of broken birds—but I put them back together again, too, learning how the crowing sound was made by a tiny bellow in the breast, and piecing the poor fellows together in ways my father would have found horrifying, making great, huge cockerels with four or five beaks crowing in harmony. I read endless books with onionskin pages concerning the great fiddlers of old: the Kappa and the Lizard-Breeders, who made such things as I could never dream to touch, who wrote out the whole universe in scales on an iguana's back. Where had they gone, that no one could now see much on an iguana but ill temper? Where had they gone that the world was now so slow and dark, when turtles once grew trees of light in their skulls? I pondered this for hours, alone as I was content to be.

Eventually I exhausted the practical lessons of roosters. My parents wanted to introduce me to society, and served lavish teas with silver plates and watercress and costly oranges so that the white-wigged, whalebone-necklaced girls of Muireann would come and think highly of me, and introduce me in turn to their brothers. More than a few of them I induced to remove their wigs so I could count the hairs sewn into the cloth. Beyond that, I had no interest in

them, as they were neither made of gold nor able to crow out the morning hours, nor did their eyelids roll back and forth if you tilted their heads.

Then, of course, there were my hands. It is true that my mother had an extra joint on her smallest finger, but that seemed no good reason to have a daughter with fingers like the legs of grass-spiders. They were very good for fiddling, hopeless at pouring tea, and excellent for making rich young women scream. The glove-makers shuddered in horror and turned me away. I did not care—who can feel a bird's toothed guts with gloved hands?

Finally one of the rooster women died—the one who made the red tails—and I humbly submitted my petition to take her place. I had my own little house then, with a few small curlicues which my father assured me would reproduce in time, and from my uppermost windows I could see the crumbling sea. And tails are easy enough. I had generous portions of my days left over when those golden feathers were lined up on the shelves like red candles. And so I set aside a rooster in my sitting room, and set about fiddling with it. I am sure a Kappa would have found my wonders tawdry and plain. But I am here and they are not, and I have done the best I can.

First, I taught it to crow not only the morning but every hour of the day. This took quite some time, for I first had to teach it what an hour was. Once it reliably marked the time, I taught it to crow a great many melodies, like a little music box, and to sing a different tune for each hour. Intricate minuets for morning; slow, sighing sonatas in the afternoon; and rolling nocturnes, naturally, for the evening. Then, because I was lonely and even my father did not often visit, I taught it to sing words as it had sung tunes, and this took a very long time indeed, for there is a great difference between a note and a word.

After many lessons with which I will not bore you, the rooster marked the hours with little, nervous words: only the number of the hour at first, but then "hello" and "mother" and "ice." I found it pleasant to be with, but I also found that in my thirtieth year I was quite tired of roosters, and quite lonely for people. Muireann is a glowering and recalcitrant place where folk do not much like to speak to one another outside tea and watercress and oranges, where the rules of conversation are fixed and true as the heavens, so that no

one need tax themselves over-much. Thus I began the process of reshaping the rooster's outside as I had done its inside.

I had not nearly enough gold to build her in style—for I had decided to make a hen of my rooster, and to call her Hour, for the first things she ever knew. There was enough, only, for the eyes, my father's famous eyelids, but no more. But I had a great many rooster pieces, and broken clocks, and broken armor, and fishhooks, and such. I took away her little three-toed legs first, and fitted her with bronze bolts and calves and plate. She was like a siren then, a bird's body sewn to a woman's legs. I gave her a new torso of silver and bronze from the armor shards, and then arms, and then the throat—a new voice, lower than the chirping birdsong—and a face, my beloved girl's face that I know so well, now. Finally I gave her hands like mine, and why should I not? A child takes after her parents. For a while I used one of the old white wigs for her hair, but this only made her look ridiculous. Every day I wound her like a pocket watch, and set her going: click, click, click.

She was as curious as any child, and I brought her to my parents' teas, where she learned the words "watercress" and "biscuit" and "speak up, no one can hear you," where we misused our egg spoons together. When we returned to the house and the moon was beaming through the frost-foam, I sat her down on a chair—she had not quite gotten the trick of sitting on her own yet. She asked me, as it was the midnight hour and she did not yet speak between her alarums:

"Good children are given stories at nighttime. Am I a good child?"

"Of course, darling, you are the best child that ever used her salad fork on her snails."

"Then I should be given a story."

"All right," I said. I did not really know very many stories, though I knew a great many poems. But these are not the same thing, even if one takes the newer fashions of verse into account. I settled back in my own chair, and the moon curled up in my lap like a cat. "Once upon a time there lived a maiden in a castle—"

"What is 'Once upon a time'?" Hour interrupted.

"It means a very long time ago, or at least, long enough ago that it would be impolite to reveal the actual number of years involved."

"What is 'lived'?"

"It means to walk and talk and eat biscuits and watercress and use one's fork improperly, and also to sleep inside a house rather than out on the stones in the cold."

"What is a maiden?"

And so I had to explain about virginity, and about dowries, and marriage contracts, and hymens, and paternity, and primogeniture, and the various expressions of royalty, systems of rank, and court etiquette. After that, I had to sketch a castle for her, and explain about buttresses and moats, drawbridges and portcullises, dragons and invading armies, knights and feudalism and a general history of both architecture and comparative political systems. Then she wanted to know about weddings, and how a dress would be made, and feasts, and how food should be prepared, and rituals of pair-bonding, and what a maiden turns into after she is married. It was very tiring, and took many months.

At last, when summer had come again and the dandelions had turned to white gauze, I had just finished explicating the various methods of quarrying stone and in what countries what stones were common. Hour, with her great, eight-jointed hands on her knees, nodded her head with great effort—we had only begun to address nodding and shaking one's head—and said:

"I think I understand now. Thank you. That was a very good story."

THE VIOLINIST'S TALE, CONTINUED

"My father did not like Hour much. He felt that she never got the crook of her finger quite right when she sipped her tea. I did not have the heart to tell him how difficult it was for her to sip tea at all, how many catches and sieves I had to fix in her throat before every luncheon, so that he might love her, just a little. He did not. And so, having exhausted the amusements of whalebone harps and watercress, we set roosters aside entirely and came south. We did not intend Ajanabh, but sooner or later most folk of a certain temperament find themselves here. In a city of artists and thieves I am not entirely out of place, and Hour mends the clocks. I am a good mother; I wind her every day. She is precise and perfect, and so too the bells of Ajanabh are as accurate as the sunrise, and never fail."

The old inventor took Hour's hand, which looked as though it had been cut from a soldier's metal fist, in hers, and patted it fondly, like a grandmother proud of her cleverest child. The automaton knelt with a strange and awkward grace and laid her head on Folio's shoulder. My mother was right. All the wonders of Ajanabh were authored in that little shack.

And so too they authored my hands. Following Hour's suggestion, ten long bows were fashioned, not only of fine wood both red and dark, but within each stalk Folio laid a strand of her wiry hair and a trickle of quicksilver. No mere horsehair was strung from tip to tip, either, but Folio sent a boy with a coin to find the circus-master and ask after his mermaid, who had died of the

most unfortunate gout. Finally, ten slender bows lay on the table, torchlight flickering on their polished surfaces.

"I am no musician, but I daresay these are the finest bows made."

Being somewhat more dense in those days than I have since become, I did not quite understand, even then, what she intended. Folio laughed at my perplexed expression.

"Didn't your mother ever read you stories about little girls who make deals with the devil for the sake of a violin? I've told Hour dozens. What then, should we make of a devil who makes deals with an old woman? I think we should say that anything worth doing is worth shedding blood over."

Folio laid my hand flat on the table, and gently closed a vise around my wrist to keep it in place.

"I am sorry," said Hour, her throat clicking and whirring, "this will hurt very much. It will be like the time that Mother gave me a new arm in place of a wing."

There was blood, a great deal of blood, and a little dribble of fire, but not much, not very much at all.

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

I PULLED A PERSIMMON FROM THE TREE AND roasted it lightly for her on my thumb. Agrafena smiled beautifully, her teeth gleaming slightly orange—or perhaps I only wished to see them so. She allowed me to feed her the fruit, its skin brown and bubbling, as her own hands were indelicate.

"She took my old violin as payment," Agrafena said when she had swallowed the last morsel. "The lava-and-fire fiddle that my grandfather hoped would serve me all my days. I watched her as she fit the fiery blue bow-string to whatever strange object it was that allowed Hour to talk. She took it out—Hour was mute for days—and opened it up on her workbench, spooling the string inside. It looked like a music box fashioned from the red stuff of a rooster's coxcomb. But Hour's voice was much better after that."

We rose and walked deeper into the city still, the streets inclining downward, like water swirling toward a basin drain.

"My parents were horrified; my grandparents roared with delight, and my grandfather's fire-beard was never so bright. But I found that if I did not play every day, if I did not dance, if I did not oil my hair and tighten the leather that lashes my fingers to my arms, I would shake and shiver like a starving beast. I knew peace only when I played, and so I went into the city, where a playing beast can earn her supper. Such is the fate of devils who bargain for their fiddles." She stared ahead of her, into the murky distance. "The basil died first, you know. So fragile. My parents went to plant medicinal wildflowers outside

of Urim, and I stayed. I stayed with Ajanabh, to watch her die and hold her old red head in my arms."



We were passing through a section of town which was at once resplendent and shabby, spangled and torn. Every house's door had a curtain of some deep red or purple or green shade drawn over it, tasseled in gold. Where the drapes were drawn aside, there were ornate knockers, a griffin or a lizard or an open mouth whose tongue clacked against its lip. But the velvet was worn through in many places, even burned through, and the tassels were unraveling, and the finish on the knockers was rubbed away by countless fingers. Every window had a cascade of flowers, lilies and roses and honeysuckle—and each was wilted and fading, brown at the petals, slumped over the sill. The air was full of dead sweetness. The whole quarter was full of trilling songs, scales sung up and down by tenors and mezzo-sopranos, bombastic arias shattering goblets in every parlor.

There was a little square where the road split, and on it was a stage with long, tall supports and a checkerboard floor, long strips of turquoise satin undulating along its rear edge to represent the sea, and a red ship carved ornately and bobbing upon it. The silk was threadbare and the ship had lost one mast already, but in the torchlight one could hardly see these things. There were two men on the stage, singing fit to burst barrels, their voices punching holes in the night air. There was no audience, but in the wings, a chorus was hurriedly pulling on tights and rouging their cheeks, urgent and excited.

"Who are they performing for?" I asked.

Agrafena smiled sadly. "There are no audiences in Ajanabh. We all act; we all observe. Yet it is no less vital that the theater be perfectly timed, that the songs be on key, that the sculptures breathe as though living. This is the Opera Ghetto—poor things, the opera was always such an expensive profession. I can play my songs whenever I like, but where are they to get more rouge? Where are they to replace the shoes of the ballet corps? But they are brave and true, and there are performances every night, with matinees twice weekly. They are as faithful as husbands."

We watched the tiny opera for a time, and the women danced like no women I have seen, their parrot-feathered dresses more stalk than feather, a few strands of blue and green trailing behind them as they leapt across the stage. A girl in stilts and horns embraced a high tenor in an outlandish seal's head with one eye missing, and I was ashamed to watch their passion. I wanted to give them peace and privacy, though that is surely silly, and so I fixed my eyes at the foot of the stage while her voice spiraled up to the moonless night with the torch sparks.

At the foot of the stage was a little mound capped with a stone plaque, littered with ginger roots with faces whittled wetly into their yellow flesh and rough bouquets of violets, sheet music burnt at the edges and the satin laces of cast-off stage shoes. While I studied this diminutive monument, the show ended and the dancers stepped lightly from the stage into their homes, scraping their rouge carefully into little wooden pots, saving it for the next show.

The tenor sat down on the edge of the stage and grinned at us through his tottering papier-mâché head.

"Brought your country cousin to see the sights, Fena?"

"Hardly. And take that stupid thing off, Arioso. I never liked that story."

He lifted the seal head from his shoulders and tossed it lightly aside. Several whiskers fell out onto the stage. Under the mask he had the head of a great brown bear with yellow teeth and a torn ear. I caught my breath.

"Don't look so shocked, burnt-face. A head is a head." He put his hands to his chin and lifted off the bear's head, under which he had the clapping, flapping beak of a pelican. Cawing gleefully, he wrenched the bird head off by the throat pouch with one hand. Beneath it he was a very handsome young man, with a curly white wig and penciled eyebrows. Unceremoniously, he ripped his curls away. Beneath that, he had the long-eared, sleek-furred head of a jackal with a small black nose, and his jaw was very fierce. I waited, but he did not remove that one.

"Is that all?" I ventured.

"Maybe," he said, still grinning.

"We haven't time for this. Come, Scald, a night does not last forever, even in Ajanabh."

"Wait, wait!" the jackal-headed man cried, bounding off the stage. "She was looking at the grave! She wants to know the tale! I know she does, I can feel it in my ticket-burdened bones! It has been so long since we had anyone to talk to who didn't know our every libretto and score, Agrafena! You can't keep her all to yourself!"

"I *do* know your every libretto and score, Arioso, and besides that I know there is an army camped outside Simeon this very night, an army which contained this one, until recently. Now, do you think you can leave me in peace?"

"An *army*? Think of the full seats!"

A glare from the violinist silenced him for just a moment. "But, Fena darling, you must let me have her for a few moments. Don't be selfish! Do you know why the fields died, smoke-bones? Let me tell her—"

"The fields died because they were farmed dry for century upon century," grumbled Agrafena, scratching her shoulder blades with a long, slender bow.

"Ha!" His small black face was alight with eagerness, his pink tongue panting in and out. "That's what *you* say! But what kind of opera would that make, hm? I have never been one for *verismo*. Let me tell her the better tale, let me tell her about the Duchesses…"

THE TALE OF THE TWO DUCHESSES

IN DAYS GONE BY, WHEN THE PALMS WERE GREEN and high, and the saffron threads were stitched into the aprons of young girls with milk still on their breath, Ajanabh was a Duchy. This is not to be wondered at! No city so absurd, beguiling, and barbaric as ours would tolerate a King. Dukes are far more likely to lose their daughters to enchanted forests or to find themselves shipwrecked on sinister isles. This is a keener expression of the Ajan character than a dotard with a crown teetering on his bald head.

It so happened that the Duke had a lovely daughter, as Dukes are prone to do. Her hair was golden as a rooster's breast, her eyes bluer than the bay tide. It was clear enough that the Duke's wife had been a foreigner, but no one ever saw her. The Duke had it put about that she had died in childbed, and this was common enough that no one suspected otherwise. The child had such sweet pink cheeks and a laugh like silver falling from a sparrow's mouth, and all loved her. She was called Ulissa.

Now, it so happened that in the poorer quarters of Ajanabh, in the slosh-slough of the Vareni, which flows through the left-hand side of the city like a giant's tears, another child was born on the lowest floor of a red and pockmarked tenement, which is to say lower even than the street itself, for such buildings house the poorest folk below the grates and below the ground. This child also had golden hair and eyes like the sparkling of the sun upon the sea, and a laugh like gold coins falling from a grackle's mouth, and all in her sad little rookery doted upon her. Her name was Orfea, and in every way she

was identical to the Duke's daughter, though Orfea's mother was nothing but a seamstress with needles in her mouth and dirty blond hair sweat-plastered across broad cheeks, and Ulissa's mother's body was carried through the streets in a closed casket all of mother-of-pearl. Think not that this is strange, for in the theater we see it happen as often as not, and are undisturbed.

Now, as these children grew, the Vareni flowed thick and rich as the rents, and Ulissa had the best tutors to ply her fingers on glass harpsichords, while Orfea sang her own little songs in the morning while she folded her mother's work, and both were as happy as girls can be. Of course, Ulissa sang as beautifully as any flute may play, and longed to walk upon the stage jeweled in glass instead of rubies, and sing of unfortunate love and tame bears and a life on the sea. She sang arias until her father prayed her give him peace, for he did not approve of opera, and even then she whispered them to herself beneath her blankets. And of course Orfea, who sewed the garments of others as day dawned and day set, longed to have enough silk and trim to fashion something of her own. But even her mother's scraps were too fine and precious for a young girl to be allowed to touch, and were resold at market to buy their milk. Instead, Orfea, quick and clever, caught the vermin of her tenements and skinned them, boiling mouse stew and rat stew and mole stew, possum stew and chipmunk stew and weasel stew. Her best dress was made of these weasel skins, and it was softer than anything her mother mended.

And when they were grown as two swans with their heads bent heart-wise, they happened to meet upon the roadside, Orfea on her way to fill her basket with turmeric and blueberries at the market, and Ulissa to have her best boots mended.

Can you not see this scene in its proper regalia, staged and sung? The two sopranos in their golden wigs! The glorious set-pieces! We perform *The Two Duchesses* once a year in their honor—you must come!

So it was—and you must, in your mind, see it as it is rightly shown, with Ulissa in her ermine and black bodice, with a little crown of netted silver over plush blue linen, and Orfea in her weasel rags, her plump calves showing, her feet all bare and humble! You must imagine it, how they each dropped their burdens in shock and surprise, how they touched each other's peculiar curls, how they exclaimed in wonder!

“Why, you could be my mirror, walking the streets like a girl!” cried Ulissa.

“Why should I be your mirror, just because you can afford glass! You could as well be mine, and how dare you walk strumpet-proud, bearing my face?”

“Let us not be enemies!” said the Duke’s daughter. “For what fun we might have if we were allies!”

And so it was decided. Ulissa would go into the slums and sing for her supper, and Orfea would wear ermine and laced corsets. Neither was entirely sure that she would be as happy in her new life as in her old, but it seemed too good a trick not to play it at least once, and besides, Ulissa had seen many an opera in which this sort of thing turned out reasonably well. Once a month, they would meet and exchange clothing again, and go to rest in the arms of Orfea’s broad-cheeked mother, and Ulissa’s white-coated father, for a single day before separating again.

For a long while, this was a very satisfactory arrangement. Ulissa rose quickly among the actresses of Vareni-side, for her hair was golden and her eyes were blue, and even in these parts it is well enough known that this is the proper masque of an ingénue. Because of her high bearing and her cultured voice, she earned for herself the nickname of The Duchess, and laughed to herself every night in a shabby bedroom where bottles of perfume stood dusty and dear, where Orfea had boiled water with rose petals and rose hips floating pink and red until some thin scent could be gleaned. Ulissa would touch these bottles and smile, and think of her far-off friend.

Orfea, for her part, learned to dance in very complicated ways, and in very complicated dresses, and though she liked the Duke very much, thought he was odd and haggard about the eyes. She did not dare ask about the golden-haired woman who had once lived there, but on her lace-covered table there were costly oils of frankincense and rosewater and ambergris, and she touched them with wonder, thinking of her far-off friend.

Each month they met in a courtyard far from the center of anything, peppered with persimmon trees and coconut shells. Orfea would take her weasel-skin dress in hand with joy, and help Ulissa into the black gowns she loved so well, and arrange her familiar hair under the glittering snood. But one month of all months, as sweet little Orfea was skipping home, fur-clad, thinking of her mother’s caterpillar pies and stone tea, she was stopped by a

curious sound in a nearby alley, and paused, as girls ought never to do, to listen.

It was a clacking and a dragging, and a chirruping and a moaning. Orfea, with her curls close around her chin, twisted her weasel-tail belt and peeked around the corner—only to glimpse a Basilisk, his head bloodied and baleful, clambering up the cobbles. She gasped and hid herself, for even poor girls hear stories, and our Orfea knew well that the gaze of the Basilisk turns flesh to stone. But oh! Foolhardy Orfea! She had to look again, to have a thing to tell her mother, to have a thing to tell her friend, who knew well enough all the wonders of the Duke's residence, and needed nothing less than to hear once more how much better her own shoes were than a pauper's.



It was smaller than she had imagined, the size of a wildcat or a large pig. It was a four-legged serpent covered in a cockerel's feathers, all black and red and pale gold, and its face twisted into a scaly, peeling, greenish brown beak. Upon its head was fixed an iron miter, which pinched terribly; that the young girl could plainly see. Trickles of blood had dried around the bands. It moaned and pulled itself up the steep turn, its jaw broken and scabbed. Its feet were red sandstone, pocked and prickled, the very stone of the streets and walks and campaniles of Ajanabh. They scraped along the road, sending up the occasional spark.

Now, it is well known that young women with golden curls and blue eyes are afflicted with a certain fatal innocence. Thus it is that in Ajanabh, where the local coloring tends toward the dark and coppery, there are so many clever, cunning girls. But in pity, as her folk are compelled to do by some inner song which sings not to others, Orfea cried out and went to the poor beast—imagine the aria floating high and pitiful!—wrapping it in her arms and loosening the miter and rubbing its shattered jaw.

The creature looked at her in horror, glaring and gazing with all its might. Yet Orfea lived, warm and sweet.

“Why do you not turn to stone? I demand that you turn to stone immediately!” roared the Basilisk. But his voice was rough and sibilant, as it too was all of red sandstone.

Orfea’s gentle brow furrowed. “I do not rightly know—but is it not fortunate for you that I do not? I can clean your wounds and make you well. It is as simple to sew flesh as organdy.”

The Basilisk sniffed her from neck to ankle, and when his beak grazed her hem, he recoiled. “What sort of creature goes swathed in weasel skin? I am *quite* sure that is not the height of fashion.” The girl understood him well enough, for many of her friends and uncles in the tall tenements were often as drunk and slurred as a mutilated Basilisk.

“I am not the height of fashion, myself.” She shrugged.

“Weasel is the enemy of the Basilisk, forever and all time. It is but the thickness of a dress which protects you from me.”

“Then I am thankful for it, and I will make you right again. But what has happened to you, poor beast?”

The Basilisk squirmed out of Orfea’s arms, nipped her briefly, just to see what she tasted like, and sighed his resignation. Whipping his tail around him in an oddly feline gesture, he began, his tongue-stone wagging pitifully.

THE TALE OF THE TONGUE

THE TONGUE OF A BASILISK IS A VALUABLE thing—the thin veneer of skin, thinner than a manuscript page, hides a muscle all of fire, and with this we hunt, and eat tasty hens and seabirds and pretty little finches. You might think it is wicked of the Basilisk to eat hens, but we will eat what we like, and if what we like is you, woe to your bones! In the lands where the sun is hotter than a thrice-struck blade and the earth is parched as a throat, it is known by even the smallest child that the Basilisk were born when a hen, her feathers warm and golden, saw a clutch of serpent's eggs whose mother had been eaten by barbarous, base, blackguard Weasel, and being kind in her chicken's heart, sat upon the eggs until they hatched.

Hens ought not to sit upon things which are not theirs. One of the little brutes ate her right up, with bits of shell still clinging to her pate. And then, being a wise beast, she began to look for Weasel, who had chewed on her mother's backbone. Ah, but Weasel is tricky, is he not? She could not touch him, when she found him in his filthy hole, though she lashed her fiery tongue at his tail and reached for his furry throat with her throttling claws and glared and glared until the grass itself had turned to stone.

"What have I done?" cried Weasel, trickster-cunning. "I was only hungry! I have my own babes to feed!"

But we were not fooled. Weasel may seem sweet—so may anything. Weasel had eaten our mother, and she must have been a great serpent—cry Woe and Harm! How shall we know her now that Weasel has taken her from us?—for

her green meat in her murderer made him by some dread alchemy immune to the tricks of her children.

Weasel is wicked; we shall not forget.

But here we are, feathered and scaled and delighted to turn things to stone and burn birds into supper in midair. We make it our business to search out Weasel in all his horrid haunts, but in these degenerate days, this is more a hobby of the Basilisk than a Quest, for Weasel breeds quickly and is wretched, while Basilisk breeds slowly, and is noble. Instead we take great joy in our art—for who in the wide world can sculpt in better fashion than we, who need but glance at a thing to make its likeness in stone, perfect and fell?

We are each of us capable of casting a certain stone—my eye is prone to red sandstone, plain and sorry though it may be. I have in my time glanced at Kings and Queens, maidens and youths, soldiers and farmers, corn and wheat and peas and melons, dogs with bells on their collars, horses with fringes on their reins, cows with wet noses, a few lions and many lizards, and Weasel, always Weasel, wherever he lies. Of these I have made many fine works, statues where sparrows rest in the eye sockets, a *pietà* that babes still come from far and wide to see. Only Weasel escapes my gaze—but then, perhaps one ought not to immortalize a rat and a coward.

I took the miter after a war widow lifted her daughter from the wreckage field and, weeping toward heaven, was caught in my stare. In me she became art, and her bleeding child with her, and it is true what I tell you, that even now she stands in that mud-mire as a war memorial, and children pile up roses and scallions and peppermints at her feet. My brothers saw this was worthy and good. They wedged the miter onto my head and oh, it hurt, but I was proud that day!

Thus it was that I was not afraid when three women approached me, shading their eyes and singing a dirge. I would make of them graces and goddesses cast in sandstone, scarlet and shining! As they came close, however, I revised my plan, and decided to make them demons, for they were terribly cut and bruised, their breasts severed and bandaged, black blood staining their white frocks, their hair a mass of writhing snakes which seemed exhausted, their forked tongues lying on their mistresses' shoulders, their green skin flushed an unhealthy black. Out of the mouth of each maid trickled a half-

dried spit of blood, and they would not look at me, being cunning maids of no gold locks. No matter—I still had my tongue, and I flicked it at their feet experimentally. I am interested in the varying taste of humans, as I have heard in many ways it is similar to Weasel's. They stepped back quickly, as though from the frothing edge of the sea. Still they shaded their eyes and would not look at me.

I shook my feathers. "What is it you want? You are too clever by half, so you might as well speak."

But they would not. They closed their eyes and opened their mouths as one and I saw that their tongues had been hacked out so far back that I could not see the stumps.

"Has Weasel done this to you?" I said. It must be here admitted that we Basilisk are often somewhat narrow in our understandings of horrid deeds. There is only Weasel, who is wicked, and Basilisk, who is noble.

They shook their heads and shuddered. From their skirts they drew a little mirror, and I recoiled—but they chased me with its tiny glass, and I caught my eye in its rim. But only one eye, for the women had only a small mirror, a circle of silver, and I could not see all myself. But I was rooted to the spot nonetheless, and I could feel the beginnings of stone tickling at my claws. Do you know, it feels something like your foot falling asleep, the prickles of blood drifting away where you cannot reclaim it. I watched my one rolling eye in the glass, its iris and its white, and I could not look away.

And so I stood there while they cut my tongue out of my head and, bloody and dripping, shoved it into one of their waiting, empty mouths.

The Tale of the Two Duchesses, Continued

"It hurt so much," the Basilisk moaned. "And there was so much blood, blood and fire. I stumbled and retched for days, the taste of my own tongue still slick in my mouth. Finally, though there was no art in it, I found a lumbering lizard, turned him to stone, and took his tongue, which faded into sandstone even as I closed my beak over it. The fire still in my blood fused the stone to flesh, but it is a weak join." He shuffled from one stone foot to the other. "That was a long time ago. But it still bleeds. The stone chafes the skin."

"What vile women!" Orfea cried. "Why would they have done such a thing to you? What possible reason?"

"All creatures have their reasons which no other creature divines. But in these later evenings, I wonder if they were not part Weasel, with their fur hidden away."

Can you not see this pair, walking through the early evening light which is so famous, the cool blues which fall across the crimson stones? It is here the flutists play an interlude in a minor key, and all folk weep.

In the months to come, Orfea washed the Basilisk's wounds and rubbed salve into the places where his miter cut the scales, and ground his tongue to smooth on the whetstone near the stables of the Duke's Palace. In time, the Duke died, and still Ulissa did not desire to return to the Palace, and Orfea did not desire

to return to her mother's shop. And so Orfea, too, became a Duchess, and a blue sash was strung from her shoulder to her hip, and a bonny sword appended to her side.

Yet the Duchess of Ajanabh did not tell her friend Ulissa about the beast, for she longed for a thing which was hers alone, which she did not have to share with the beautiful soprano, whose name rose and rose, as she sang the greatest parts yet written for the stage: Sigrid, Zmeya, Dapple, Diamond, whose part is so high and sorrowing that only the most discerning can hear the notes. The two women were as dear as ducats to one another, but each did keep her own things, and where Orfea had her mangled beast, Ulissa had a butcher's boy who made her meat pies every Tuesday morning and once killed a stag just for her.

The Basilisk, for his part, was fascinated by Orfea's stubborn refusal to turn to stone. At first he tried to catch her unaware, but she was always so careful to wear her weasel-skin dress, and though the smell of it distressed him, he learned to catch the smell of her underneath the weasel, something very like damp lilies crushed beneath a cart wheel. After a long while he stopped trying to taste her, and finally, began to look for her coming to his little courtyard full of persimmons and coconuts, waited and leapt into her arms when she arrived, rolling in the dust with her and biting her playfully about the arms. He told her terrible, outlandish tales of the misdeeds of Weasel and glorious genealogies of Basilisk and their great sculptures. She told him about her advisors, and her suitors in their silly suits of armor, and her vials of perfume, and how many owners her sword had known before her. She fed him crickets and squirming squirrels, and once he brought her a stone stag, just for her, tall antlers flashing red and rough.

But even these merry duets cannot last forever—though you ought to hear the castrato we have to play the butcher's boy!—and a day dawned stormy and flat, as skies will be when rain is near, so near as to smell it, but not quite yet arrived. The Basilisk was rolling on his back, snuffling the wind, reveling in the wet-mud smell of the coming shower. And he saw, in the corner of his eye, a woman running through the persimmon trees, her hair flapping behind her, golden as apples, her dress dark and thick and furred, her smell like damp lilies beneath a cart wheel. He chortled in his beastly joy and waddled happily

toward her, his ambling gait stomping heavily, stone on stone. He could not quite catch her, and her hair teased him, streaming bright as lightning in the dark clouds.

Finally, he clamped the edge of her trailing dress under his claws and hooted triumph in his reptilian way. The woman stumbled and turned to look at him, at what had caught her, golden hair framing her face like a fine fur—and turned to stone. Her eyes went last, closing into sandstone with a hurt and puzzled expression. We can only imagine her final cry, the voice which set the opera of Ajanabh alight—then silence.

The Basilisk was frightened and baffled—the woman looked just like his Orfea, smelled like her—but where was her dress? Why would she wear stoat fur instead of Weasel? Did she not love him? Did she not call him her best and only beast? Her beloved monster? Had he not let her grind his very tongue against her stone? She had abandoned him, betrayed him! Perhaps she had meant to send him away, but thought so little of him now that she had forgotten. She was Duchessing about without him and cared nothing at all for how he might miss her. What had he done? How had he given offense?

The Basilisk wept. He howled in the storm and the thunder quailed. He called her name over and over, but she did not come. His tears streamed fire into the cobble cracks, and he struck his stone claws against the trees until the ground was wet and slick with fallen fruit. He had done nothing! He had loved her better than she deserved! Perhaps it was not a dress after all, but she herself, her wicked, Weasel self, seducing him into complacency so that she could feast on his backbone! Well, he had shown her!

The Basilisk wept. But he had loved her. He had eaten from her hand. She had told him how stupid the suitors who came bearing flowers and baronies were. She had stroked his pate beneath the miter. He had laid his head on her lap. The Basilisk lay on the earth and keened, in rage and grief and loneliness, keened until his stone tongue fell from his mouth and he could keen no more.

Holding his grief before him like a lamp, the Basilisk left the city of Ajanabh. And holding his rage before him like a pike, he stared hard at everything he passed: fence posts, stables, windmills. Basil fronds. Garlic patches. Red-pepper fields and black-pepper fields, the green peppers and the pink, and the cinnamon groves, and the coriander fields, and the saffron fields, and the

cumin farms, the salt flats with their crystals like hard, cutting snow, the mustard plants, the paprika bushes, and the vanilla beans, thin and dark on the vine.

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

"IT IS SAID THAT SOMEWHERE BEYOND THE blasted, stone-struck fields of Ajanabh, there is a clear mountain pool with the most extraordinary figure crouched over it: a terrifying stone serpent covered in stone feathers, with a miter on his head and tears in his eyes, staring into the water like a mirror. What you see at the foot of the stage is our memorial to the greatest voice ever to grace the Opera Ghetto: Ulissa, who was Duchess twice over, sweet Ulissa, dead for the lack of a dress!"

Arioso finished with a flourish, and bowed deeply.

"You know that isn't what happened." Agrafena rolled her eyes.

"Who is to say it isn't?" the jackal-headed tenor said indignantly.

"I am! No Basilisk could have blighted every field, yet every field perished."

"Ah! But the root systems, Fena dear, the roots! The stone would have spread, even if you could never see it in the withering leaves. And no city garden was touched. Only the wide and ox-tilled fields." He crossed his arms over his chest in satisfaction, and turned to me. "When Orfea discovered what had happened—for of course, Ulissa had been caught in his gaze, and mistaken for her friend! Ah, without tragic mistakes of identity, where would the theater be?—she went mad with grief for both of them, and for her city which was blasted and broken. And perhaps, just perhaps, the mad Duchess wanders the city to this day, mourning by the riverside! Is it not a marvelous tale?"

I agreed that it certainly was.

"If you are finished, we must go, Arioso," the violinist insisted.

"Yes, yes, to the roost and the river with you—you *are* taking her by the river way, aren't you? It is the best and loveliest route. But promise you'll come back and play for the Duchesses this year. Swear it! No one can play the Basilisk's Dirge like you! And bring your audience with you—she is a pearl among empty seats!"

Arioso kissed both of us noisily on our cheeks, though his kiss went straight through my smoke, and returned to the stage, where the beautiful sea set was being struck, and a forest raised in its place, with leaves all of ladies' cast-off spring veils.

Agrafena did indeed take me by the riverside, the Vareni, which flowed through the corners of the city, cutting deep into the layered streets, as though Ajanabh had always been there, and the river, a latecomer, had had to make do with grinding down avenues and boulevards instead of hills and mountains. The thoroughfares arched out over the water like battered cliffs, their undersides curving sharply away from the current. Leering lanes had long ago crumbled into little red deltas, where ramshackle fishing huts and lock-houses had been built onto the ruins of what might have once been a grocer's alley.

The water of the Vareni, which rushed and burbled, was of every conceivable color. In Kash, everything is more or less fire-colored: red and golden and black and white and the occasional blue. But here was crashing, waving water in rose and emerald and cobalt, stark yellow and depthless black, white and scarlet and orange, indigo and silver, gold, and flashing, peaking turquoise. Even in the inky, starless night, the colors gleamed. The whole thing whirled by, eddying and swirling, sending up a rainbow of spray against the docks and finger piers which jutted out into the water, for the Vareni was a warm, swift-flowing river, treacherous and deep.

Agrafena watched it go by for a moment, and chuckled at my astonished stare.

"Up northside"—she pointed—"is the Dressmaker's Parish. For centuries upon centuries, they ran their cloth through the headwaters of the Vareni, the final wash of the dye. All those colors leeched into the water, and even though

there is but one lonely spider there now, weaving her ball gowns still, the colors are fast, and the Vareni is bright."

She led me down to the waterside, to a tall and spindly bell tower which had no bell, though several suspect shards of bronze lay shattered around its base. A warm light seemed to flicker inside, but I could not be sure. Water like blood licked the stairs.

"This is where I leave you," Agrafena said, drawing out one side of her long hair and playing a few slow, jagged notes. "When you will, find me in my courtyard again, and I will take you back to Simeon's hands."

She walked away, her red dress swaying, and her feet kicked a few swift, dancing steps as she disappeared behind a thin little chapel with a kicked-in door. I turned to the bell tower, the roost, I supposed, and sucked in my breath. The Vareni smelled like fish and linen. The door was no more than a gaping arch, and I ducked inside, drifting up the long, curving stairs, my smoke behind me like a shadow.

In the upper rooms, by the light of my own flames, I could see a great ivory cage, burned black by the blazing tail of a Firebird, who lay sleeping within, his wings folded gently over the dozing form of a young girl, whose toes stretched and curled lazily as she dreamed. The ceiling spun away overhead, into the broken bell hook and beyond, and the night poured in.

THE TALE OF THE WASTE, CONTINUED

THE VEILED WOMAN PUT HER HAND ON THE leopard's head, and the great cat arched her neck to meet the peeling palm, purring as her ears were thoroughly scratched.

"She does not sicken you?" the Djinn asked.

"She does not repulse me, no. She is mine. The leash goes both ways. And her hand can do little to me by now that is not already done."

Surprisingly dexterous, Rend pulled a little pack with her soft, spotted mouth from her mistress's voluminous black robes and opened the flap, gently drawing a water flask from its depths and a few strips of dried meat and crusted bread. Curling her lips away from the food so as not to moisten it, she pushed it into the cage, where Scald chewed it gratefully. She refused the water, however.

"That I do not need. They mean for me to starve here, not die of thirst. We do not thirst. What fire longs to be quenched? Either way, it will not be long."

The leopard shrugged her spotted shoulders. The evening was deeper now, and the scent of weeds and mouse bones was thick on the wind.

"We find it interesting that you speak of Ajanabh, for that was the home of my lady, before she was stricken. She knows little of what has passed there since she left the red towers for the black spires of Urim. Did you betray your people? Did you do something to keep them from the carnelian box?" Rend asked, her whiskers twitching.

The Djinn-Queen frowned, her orange-lined eyes narrow and angry. Then she laughed, harsh and hoarse, golden tears showing at the corners of her eyes, where the fire made filigree patterns, as she shook her head. “That silly box. If only they had told me what was in it. But then, I suppose generals are always foolish, no matter how dazzling the host they command. But I would not call anything I did betrayal, no more than it was betrayal to tell no Djinn but the highest about Kashkash’s true nature, or to keep a Queen ignorant of her own war.”

“I meant no offense,” the cat said, and the Djinn glared, not at her, but at the woman with black veils, whose cool, sad eyes returned the gaze. She did not move, and after a long while, the Djinn sighed.

“I think you and your mistress are both impatient. I will come to the box and the cage in time, if you will give me leave to meander in the Ajan alleys of my tale…”

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

THE FLOOR OF THE CAGE WAS PILED WITH cushions trimmed in fused tassels and rich gold thread. The child was resting on a lovely blue brocade, and she turned in her sleep, pulling up the Firebird's wing over her shoulder like a blanket. His neck was curled protectively around her, banked and glowing, his beak polished brass, sticking out between the blackened bars of the cage. The door swung open and free, and with the breathing of the pair, the whole thing swayed back and forth on the frame that held it up a ways above the dusty floor.

"Hello?" I said softly, but my voice echoed like a scream against the red walls. The bird stirred and his eyes slid open lazily, shimmering eyelids drooping. The child moaned softly and her aviary caretaker hushed her.

"Go back to sleep, dovelet, it's only a Djinn come to see Papa." I saw her head fall back to its pillow, and soon enough the contented sounds of a child sleeping drifted out of the cage.

The Firebird gently extricated himself from the child and hopped out of the cage. He was huge, the size of a young elephant, his plumage all the familiar hearth colors: deep red and orange forefeathers down to creamy sear-white underfeathers. And his tail was aflame—unlike the Djinn, the tail of a Firebird is the only thing which is truly afire—long tailfeathers like those of a peacock, tipped in curls of fire and marked in intricate, blistering designs. As he woke the flame wound up from sweet ember to soft roar, and I thought him beautiful in that moment, for fire, as ever and always, speaks to fire.

"You must hush," he said, his voice like a green branch falling into ash. "My daughter needs her sleep."

"Your daughter? But she's human!"

"The ways of the world are strange and dear, my little flint-strike. My daughter she is, doubt it not."

"Simeon sent me to you. I understand now what he meant: a flame like my own."

"Now why in the world would he do a thing like that?" The great bird put his head to one side, as if considering a pile of seed.

"I am looking for a box of carnelian—"

"I'm sure I haven't anything like that, but if you care to look, just keep soft on your feet."

"No, no, I'm sure it would be hidden. But Simeon seemed to think I should see you." I looked down, already a little ashamed of what trespassed outside Simeon's embrace. "Did you know there is an army outside? They will attack tomorrow, or the day after."

The bird fluffed his wings. "The whole city stinks of them. Even Kings and Queens sweat, and their swords weep, and I can smell the cannon even now. And you have their mire all over you, so I am reasonably certain I know you, too. I am sure Simeon means for me to tell you a great many things, in hopes that you will think well enough of us not to smoke us out like rats. But I am not sure at all that I care to speak to you, and I certainly know nothing about your ridiculous little box."

"Please," I whispered, "I only have until dawn. I have been Queen for no more than a day. It is not my fault. Tell me why you are in a cage with a little girl, and perhaps in your tale I can find their box."

The Firebird glowered, and finally settled down onto the floor, his flaming face very close to mine.

"Are you lost?" he whispered.

"Yes," I said fervently.

"Poor lost things are a specialty of mine…"





THE TALE OF THE CLOAK OF FEATHERS

CALL ME LANTERN—AND DON'T LAUGH. I WAS always gentle, always. I was a sweet little flame in a glass. I was never a devouring blaze. That is for you, and your kind, and your army, and your cursed box.

That was for him.

The Wizard was holding my feather when I flew into the turret room—I knew he would be. I had felt his hands on my fringe for years, waiting for a need. The moon was a slash on his collar when I alighted on the sill, pale and sharp. Need stood in the corner, with a great, round belly swathed in an elaborate yellow coat, the color of daffodils with the first sunlight of all sunlights on their petals. It was epauletted in gold, and spangled in gold, and buttoned in gold, and belted in gold. The lapels were fringed in a green so bright it wearied the eye, and his stockings and high-heeled boots matched to the toe. He had a thin, long sword with a graceful basket looped into his belt, festooned with ribbons, the expensive, poised kind of sword that lets one know immediately that the bearer doesn't mean anything by it. He had a black wig that glossed and curled opulently to his waist, and over his face he wore an angular dancing-mask, painted with gold leaf like a manuscript, with extraordinary peacock feathers fanning out from the hollow eye sockets, their dazzling fronds bedecked with violet eyes. The mouth was a hard little slit.

In his green-gloved hand was a sack of spices, so rich and fragrant they had wet the bag through and filled the room with heady scents.

"Listen well, my young partridge. This is Kostya of Vareni-side, and he will shortly be the possessor of your feather, and you must be a good little parakeet and obey him as well as you have obeyed me by flying all the way here in the dark and cold, and leaving such a lovely, lithe goose crying in your wake."

"There is no need to gloat, Omir," said Kostya, his voice hollowed by the slit in his mask, but still eel-soft and insinuating. "It is poor form. I'm sure he is quite wretched enough without your help. I shall take him, and keep him dry, and feed him so many charming things to eat. All the mice he could hope to gobble up, served on platters of glass and gold. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Lantern?"

The man in the yellow coat put his hand on my wing, and it seemed to writhe beneath the glove. I shuddered, and my colors flared worry and warning, blue on white. I said nothing.

But the deal had been struck, and the Wizard took his bag of spices, inhaling with delight. Kostya of Vareni-side stroked the edge of my feather with an intimate little sigh, his breath ragged and rattled as he fingered the fringes—and then opened the door of a tall ivory cage, and gestured inside.

What could I have done?

The journey to Ajanabh was a long one, and to the rim of the desert, the best route is by river. Being a river man of long acquaintance, Kostya chartered a lavish barge the colors of pumpkins and blood, and I was set in my cage at the prow, to watch the foaming green rivers of the mountain country gurgle by. The barge teetered under my weight, but held without too much complaint.

The river was wide, wider than I had expected. I could see the far green shores, lit up with fireflies and spackled with mosquitoes, but they were not very near at all, and the water foamed brown and weedy around the barge. Beside me on the deck sat a large glass goblet set into a firm wooden hold, and in the goblet was a fat goldfish, snapping her veil-thin tail around her. Her scales caught the river light and her black eyes blinked slowly, one after the other. The cut crystal turned her skin into prisms.

"Are you enjoying the river?" she said, her voice bubbling in the water. "I could speak to the pole men, if the flow is not smooth enough."



"I barely feel the motion of the river," I said gloomily. "It is as smooth as I could ask for, but I did not ask, and I do not wish to go where the river wends."

"I am sorry. It is the nature of animals to be caged and cupped whenever a curious man happens by. This is tragic, but one must take a philosophical outlook. The river is long; the glass is fragile."

I ground my beak. "Ajanabh is wide, and the cage is strong."

The fish brightened; her scales shimmered with pleasure. "Are you going to Ajanabh? I am only taking you so far as the river wanders. How lovely! I have relatives in Ajanabh, you know."

"How wonderful for you. I am not looking forward to it. The peacock-man in the yellow coat says he will feed me mice there, but I think a man with a longing to feed mice to birds may pursue that interest anywhere. If he wants to take me by river to a city I have hardly heard of, there will be more than mice when we arrive."

"But the river there tastes like palm sugar! I do love these cold mountain routes, but when the night is very blue, I think of the Vareni, and how it would have felt in my mouth." She turned lazily in her water, brushing the glass with her fins. "Every morning, they pour me out into this river, and I taste the water —it is like frozen moss this far up in the heights—I taste its current and its depth, the direction of its flow, I find the safe channel, I discover whether or not the trout are spawning this month. And they scoop me back up into my glass, and I chart their course through the flavors of the river."

"They might have given you a bigger glass."

"Men are inconsiderate. I am sure they believe my wine goblet to be an ocean bounded in glass. But I am the pilot of this barge, and they can do nothing without me." Her face, such as a fish's face may be, turned mischievous and sly. "But once, you know, I was a dragon."

I laughed. The sound rang out over the quick water. "You must have been the smallest dragon ever to pick a maiden's apron from your claws."

She colored angrily. “Don’t laugh! I *was* a dragon! And bigger than you are, by far…”

THE RIVER PILOT'S TALE

I WAS SPAWNED IN A GROANING LOCK ON THIS very river. It was an accident—the water swirls up, the water swirls down, and every so often a handful of gold specks are caught in the sucking whirlpools, and make do in the pockets and eddies beneath the algae-slick walls. We are the lock-children: I and all of my brothers and sisters are called Lock, and it is only confusing in mating season.

The mountains here hunch and bow like old men's shoulders, and everywhere there are clouds and mists and trees bent low to the water, so low that they grow and grow beneath the tiny waves until the river floor is nothing but trees from either bank tangled up in each other, threshing the mud between their leaves. The water is cold and fast, and in the crags where ice creeps in along the sand, seizing the bowing trees, leaving only the middle of the river to run and chase as it is accustomed to do, there is a waterfall.

I do not rightly know where the first goldfish heard that this waterfall was anything but an unfortunate drop in the river table. But gossip travels among us quickly; this is the nature of fish. And some red-finned fellow had heard it whispered by the trout, who had it from the pike, who had been assured by the thorny-boned catfish, who had listened rapt to the drumfish's clacking tongue, who knew the eel would never lie, who was in awe of the adventures of the bass. And all of these agreed, that if a goldfish could but leap over this waterfall, she would become a dragon.

Many of the Locks disbelieved this: what a preposterous idea. Dragons are made from eggs and fire and in far-off countries which no polite fish has ever

heard of, and besides, who has even seen a dragon in these days, let alone heard rumor of smoke or scorched maidens dipping their blackened hair in the river to cool it? But then, we Locks were born separate from the other goldfish, and are a recalcitrant and ornery breed. I alone went with the goldfish who were born in the open water to the foot of the fall, to stare into the mist and the pounding, thumping water, to wonder how a goldfish could ever manage to leap so far, if anyone had done it, what it would feel like to have hard green scales instead of soft gold ones, what it would feel like to breathe fire—would you choke on your own smoke? Would it burn your tongue? What does fire taste like? Most important, we gathered in orange and white and red clusters and wondered what it would be like to fly.

We had heard that dragons had wings. The sunfish and the walleye had assured us that they had seen hundreds of dragons in their time, and each of them had lovely leathery wings, sometimes brown, but more often outlandish colors, like our own skin. They were graceful, they looped and corkscrewed in the air, they tasted the wind like we tasted water and everyone, just everyone knew how beautiful a dragon was. Flying was like a long leap, the sunfish explained. So if you could leap over the waterfall, you would just keep soaring and rising, and bony wings would unfold from your back like fishing poles.

This sounded far better to us than to be small and unremarked fish, known only for a color we could not help. We wanted to fly, and scorch things with our breath! What would the fishermen say when we were dragons, and could roast them mightily? If we could put their little ones into glass bowls and feed them whenever we pleased—or not at all, if that amused us!—and laugh at how small a grown man will be if you raise him in a bowl and never let him out, not even on holidays. They would not say very much, we all agreed. And we wouldn't listen to them if they did.

But it is one thing to agree that a thing sounds fine, and another to accomplish it. We waved our tails at the foot of the falls and looked up at the mossy crags. They were so far. Some tried; every day a goldfish or two screwed up her courage and her tail muscles and shot out of the water like a flaming dart, higher and farther than any goldfish had done before—and she always fell back to the frothing pool, nowhere near the crest and just as much a goldfish as she had been a moment before.

Naturally, I wondered if a Lock might be superior. Every day we fought to stay in our homes as the water drained. We swam against the sucking flow, our muscles were tight and golden and we were bigger than the others, with all our constant struggle. But a child loves its mother's breast, and so we loved the lock.

I made my attempts at night, when the others were off feeding, so that I would not be ashamed to fall. But I leapt so far, farther than any of them, and with every leap the crest was nearer to my fins. I could taste the wind and the fire in me, swollen and ready. And then, one night when no one was looking, and even the eel and the drumfish were nosing in the mud, I leapt up, waving my tail in the wind as much like leathery, bony wings as I could imagine—and cleared the falls.

I fell with a great splash into the upper river, and had to right myself quickly to avoid going over again. I was awkward in the water, floundering as I had never had to do, with a fish's instinct for swimming being such that we have never in all the lives of fish had a word for "swimming." There is no need. I dragged myself up by a bent oak branch and lay gasping on the soil, air burning my chest, gill-less and finless and goldless, coughing and spitting and cold.

I was a dragon.

But what kind of dragon I could not begin to say. I had no wings at all, and my flesh was not scaled and green but pink and soft, and I had two legs and long, wet hair that stuck to my arms and all that came out of my mouth was bile and river, and no fire at all. But, I thought, no one has seen a dragon for so long. Perhaps this is what a dragon looks like. Everything that lives outside the water looks more or less the same, anyhow, and sunfish and walleye were often mistaken. Perhaps a dragon does have little dainty toes and blunt, sleek teeth. Who was I to argue? I had leapt the fall; I must now be a dragon, however strange a dragon that may be.

I walked down the mountain shakily, my dragon's feet soft and pale and unused to rocky jags and pebbles. I came upon a village, as dragons are wont to do, and—just like the stories!—their eyes widened and their jaws went slack and they sputtered and ran from me. But they came back with trousers and a

long, loose shirt and a belt and a hat, and told me that I could not simply walk around naked.

"Dragons may do whatever they wish," I said haughtily. "And nakedness is no worry for me. I am sorry if it is a worry for you."

But they pulled me into a little house and showed me a long, oval mirror. In it I was, I presumed, a dragon. A dragon with long hair the color of goldfish scales, and small, round breasts, and eyes blue as a river in summer, and a mole at the base of her throat. I saw nothing the matter.

"That is what dragons look like." I shrugged, sounding more sure than I felt. I cleared my new throat. "I'm surprised at your provincial ignorance. But if the color of my scales bothers you, I will take your silly clothes."

They laughed nervously and eyed me from the corners of the room—as well they might!—but I dressed, and with great, hard-soled shoes, walked at my leisure down and out of the mountain.

Summer wound golden around me as I ventured into the world. I ate rabbits and rats, breathing on them until they just stopped running and stared at me while I puffed out my cheeks and became very red in the face. I sighed and snatched them with my hands. I was very disappointed in a dragon's lot. In my darkest moments, when the night was damp and the wolves crooned ballads to each other in the far-off hills, I allowed myself to consider that perhaps I was something slightly less than a dragon, but certainly more than a goldfish.

One morning when the sun was thin and bright on the blackberries, a hunting party came into the valley and caught no hart, but snared a dragon. My face was stained with blackberry juice and I did not know what to say, but the leader of the party was handsome and dark, and though I snarled at him, he did not seem bothered.

"I am a dragon." I sighed, almost pleading with them to believe me. "You ought to run and scatter like ants."

The man looked at me quite seriously. "No," he said, "you are not. My father has a dragon head in his hall, and though it is quite dusty and one nostril has a mouse living in it, I should never mistake it for a maiden."

“But I leapt the falls!” I hissed desperately. “No one else has ever done it! I! A lock-fish!”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about, but a young girl like you should not be out in the wilderness with nothing between you and the brambles but some uncle’s trousers.”

“My uncles don’t wear trousers—”

I protested, but his fellow hunters surrounded me in a moment like hares around a fox, and ushered me firmly onto a horse, and the horse galloped through the dilapidated gate of a city all of red towers. As we rode, he told me of the glory of Ajanabh, the greatest city which had yet graced the earth, great in all things, including the currency.

“Did you know,” he said, his gray eyes flashing like a minnow in an eddy, “we have the most extraordinary coins! Each coin, blue and bright as your own eyes, has two perfect holes in its center! It is such a marvelous country—you could be happy there…”

THE TALE OF THE AJAN COIN

LONG BEFORE EVEN MY GREAT-GREAT-GRANDFATHER'S day, the coin was whole, and solid yellow gold, and prized as all coins are. There was no Duke in those days, and Ajanabh ground along like a clock: more or less on time, hoping someone will think to wind it, but unable to be truly concerned. Currency was what had been stolen from other cities, or brought by the river bargers. Nothing was minted here.

In this raucous place lived a man by the name of Amilcar, and this man was a fisherman on the Vareni. He caught pike and carp—Why do you look so pale, my dear?—of the most fabulous colors, bright yellow and deep green and eye-aching blue. Now this fisherman was wiser than the fishermen of the degenerate tales of the north, and he spent his evenings with a horn of brass and bone, whose rim he used to rub with oil and light, to chase away the river insects. He played the most delicate, lovely music in his little hut, lighting the banks of the many-colored river with his flaming horn.

Now, Amilcar was quite lonely, and even a clever fisherman still reeks of fish. Beyond the local prostitutes, his prospects were few. And so, each evening, he would wet a sheet of music in gloss and place it against his rocking chair. As time went by, the tea-and-sturgeon-stained sheets with their notes like spider's legs thickened and grew into the shape of a lovely wife, all of music. And each evening Amilcar would sit opposite his prize and wish for it to open treble-clef eyes or eighth-note lips and live for him. He played the music of his wife with his flaming horn of brass and bone, but it did not wake.

And if this were a perverse northern tale, it would, eventually, and love him all its days. But we are more practical, in the country of palm and cinnamon.



Now, the Vareni, being more or less made of dye, attracts very strange sorts of fish, and very strange sorts of other things which are not fish at all, and so it was that a Lamia called Vachya watched Amilcar at his music, and loved him. He was not unhandsome, and as a Lamia is more or less a sea serpent with three blue breasts and the head and arms of a woman, she was not over-concerned about the reek of fish.

One early morning, before the sun had set about setting his cloudlures, Amilcar caught a great carp, the greatest one he had yet snared. This carp was all spangled silver, having once swallowed a great quantity of expensive thread. The carp was most displeased at having been caught—Why do you laugh, my dear?—and rolled over in Amilcar's net, a baleen hook stuck into his lip, and said in a frothy, gurgling voice:

"Amilcar, who soothes the clapping clams with his radiant horn, whose flames flash over the water! Hearken to me! If you should let me live, I shall tell you of a great treasure which crouches by your window every night!"

Amilcar thought this was very fine indeed, and was wise enough to know the ways of such fish. He agreed immediately.

"Vachya watches you, Amilcar, and besides being a sure sight better than a rocking chair full of old paper, she is a Lamia, and the gills of a Lamia are full of gold."

The fisherman let loose his carp, and when he returned home that night, he played his flaming horn as he was accustomed, peering at the breasts of his paper-wife for his song. But just when he was playing so beautifully that even the tone-deaf eel was leaning out of the water to hear, he leapt from his chair with his horn in one hand, and with the other threw open the window, where

Vachya was curled, her many-fringed tail as blue as dye, and her piscine eyes blinking in surprise.

"I have never seen a Lamia before," said the fisherman. "Why do you come to my window?"

"I heard you, on the open ocean, where the ships break the spume like whales' heads…"

THE TALE OF THE BLUE SERPENT

DO NOT GO TO THE RIVER'S MOUTH, THE mother-Lamia say. *It will gobble you up, and then where will you be?*

On maps they always mark us, the hoops of our blue tails humping out of the sea, demarcating the places where you must not go. But who will tell us? The Lamia were born in the beginning of the dark of the world, when there was nothing but a great black sea. Some will say there was always green land, just as there was always black sea, but these are the lies of the landlocked, and we who breathe it know that the sea is greater than the land, ever and always, and cannot have been anything but the primeval blood of the world. The Lamia are old, older than salt. Our three breasts are called morning, evening, and midnight, and we encompass the heavens in our coils.

In the land of the Lamia, all things are blue. The waves lend their own color, and I cannot recall a time when blue was not the sum of my sight. Fields of blue coral where turquoise fins flashed, wavering fronds of cobalt seaweed and blue-black undersea mountains tipped in the last sapphire light where the moon pierced deepest into the water. The Lamia were the bluest of all blue things, our fins snapping bright, our skin like an ink spill, our lures glowing ghostly, blue light in the blue dark. When the tides were shocking and new, and the Lamia sucked the blood from the fat blue fish of the sea depths, my grandmother many times floated on the water, bathing in the moonlight, letting it turn her skin to silver and azure. From this vantage she saw a terrible thing, and her cerulean heart froze in her breast.

It was a ship, and it was bleached brown and white, riding high on the waves, and it was in no part blue. Fascinated, my grandmother followed it, her thick tail looping through the water. She spied on its decks creatures of no tail and no lure, whose skin was dry and salt-cracked. She followed until the ship wrecked itself, for if one watches a vessel long enough, one is surely to witness catastrophe sooner or later. And from the waves she pulled a single sailor, whose eyes were properly blue. Being a fish, she did not moon over his handsome features for too long before fixing her mouth to his throat and taking her supper. We are practical creatures, who live on the sea, and know that serendipitous food is to be savored, for it may not come again. In his thin blood she tasted the green land and sheer rocks which were new in the world, and shuddered.

She returned to the blue depths, and there, in the usual time, discovered that she was with child. She was disgusted and afraid: There are no male Lamia, and the old mothers, long-lived as they were, had given little thought to children. But when she was delivered of a happily wriggling sea serpent, the blue elders decided that it was the new blood, the rocky, grass-riddled blood, which had quickened her. Thus it was that ever since, when a Lamia felt the pull of daughters, she sought out a sailor and devoured him.

In this way was I born, from the slashed chest of a rum-wrangler.

Do not go to the river's mouth, our mothers say. *It will gobble you up, and then where will you be?*

Do not go there. There are monsters there, their harpoons curving up out of the deep, black places. But I was young and foolish as a tad-pole. I rejoiced in the soft blue-black water, the cold at the ocean floor, the light of my lures glittering in my hair, drawing my luncheons to me. We are deep-water fish, the Lamia. We drink blood and eat sand, and our skin does not see sun. I was strong; my tail whipped through the water. When I was grown, I went before the oldest Lamia, who is crusted with barnacles so thick it is as though she is no flesh at all, but hoary rock. I sang to her as the young ones will, a recital to please our common grandmother, my voice filled the waves with quivering

delight, with my desire for the river and the rock, my curious tail drifting toward their foreign currents.

The old Lamia yawned. Pieces of coral fractured off her jaw and floated up to the surface.

"Fine, fine," she croaked, "but could you not sing something *blue*?"

Why should I not go to the river's mouth? I thought to myself, furious, as I snapped away from her grotto. *Why should I not see the grass and the clearer water, with pink fish and gold fish, and the sun like a great burning clam?*

I went to ask my mother, who was sleek and so dark in her blue scales that she was nearly black, curling around a rock at the bottom of the world, gnawing on its stony roots: "I wish to see the river," I said.

"Do not hurt your poor old mother so."

"I am quite fierce enough to brave the river!" I cried.

Children must have been invented to vex and defy by turns. "Ask the swordfish, then; he will tell you where to go."

I went to the swordfish, silver and blue, his horn glinting in the shallower sea.

"Swim until the water turns warm, and tastes of cod, and then seek out the carp," he said.

I swam and swam, and finally the water became warm, and tasted light and flowery, like the white flesh of the cod. It was then that I heard the first thin, fiery tendrils of a song playing somewhere far off, like a beckoning. I sought out the carp, and found him chewing krill by an overturned galleon which had three sharks living in it.

"You must go until the water changes color," he said. "It will become so many things other than blue, and it will be warm as an otter's skin. That is the river. But I would not recommend it. There are monsters in the river."

With a trumpet of glee I sought out the green water, and found it flowing into the sea like silt. I leapt into the green, rolled in it, my starry lures waving in their eddies. The song was so loud, then! I sang with it, exultant. I slithered onto the shore and left a long lock of my blue hair waving on the grass, to say that I was there; alone of Lamia I was braver than any forbidding map. The water warmed my flesh, and I found I was not so dark when the ocean did not

chill me—I was turquoise and silver and cobalt, all at once, and this was delightful to me.

But then there was the singing, and I remembered what my mother had said about Sirens, but I could not help it. I swam upriver, through violet and gold currents, green and red and orange currents, and I played guessing games with the eels, and rhyming games with the osprey, and I tried to pretend no one sang. But each day I inched up the river, and each day there was singing rippling the water like a wind.

Until I came to this hut, and saw that no bird or Siren sang, but a horn, and the horn flamed white and red, its reflection gleaming golden on the water.

Do not go to the river's mouth. It will gobble you up, and then where will you be?

The Tale of the Ajan Coin, Continued

"Where will I be?" Vachya said shyly, and the fisherman helped her up into his house, where her startlingly blue tail wrapped his walls three times and then began to climb up through his chimney flue.

And so Amilcar was happy, for a time. He would not set fire to the sheet-music wife, as Vachya asked, but in the spirit of marital compromise, kept her politely in a closet. But Vachya was a wild thing, and though it was true that her gills were made of gold, it was a foreign gold with an eerie blue tint to the metal. And they could not very well sell her gills at the market. She thrashed her tail at the good china, and though her kisses were sweet as sturgeon eggs, they were hard and violent and Amilcar quailed in her embrace. But he loved her yet, and she sang with his horn so passionately that the eels fell dead in a swoon, and the river moved toward their hut to hear. She sang of sailor blood and blue milk and great blue eggs; she sang of the moon beaming with such strength on her breasts that she felt ice form on her cobalt nipples. He looked on her with wonder, and she smiled.

Now, as husbands sometimes will, Amilcar was seized with an unfortunate folly as some men are seized with leprosy. You may think this is an overstatement, but not so when one's wife is a Lamia. Amilcar traded often with the river bargers, his fish for their pots and pans and tinkered scissors, for their spice and their tales. It so happened that Amilcar desired the wife of one of the bargers, whose hair gleamed like a great store of all the spices of Ajanabh. She looked on him fondly, but was pregnant with her fifth child, and

had no time for amorous fishermen. Amilcar loved her as he had once loved his music-wife, but she did not want him.

One evening, Amilcar returned to his hut with the day's catch—a bundle of carp which did not speak or promise wives—and Vachya sat very quietly in the chair which had held the mute and voiceless wife of music. Her hair was deep blue, and tiny light shone in it, like stars, though Amilcar knew them by now for her dark-water lures, meant to catch wary fish in their enchanting lights. Her tail coiled around the entire room, huge and thick and ridged with silver-blue fins.

"How many wives do you wish to have, Amilcar?" she hissed.

"Three," he confessed, his hands shaking. "I wish to have you in my house, and the barger's wife in my bed, and my glossy wife of paper by my horn when I play."

In a rage, Vachya rose out of the roof of the house and flew in a blue streak to the river bargers. The lures in her hair shone bright as lamps. She found, in the great spice barge, the woman Amilcar loved, sleeping on her broad back, her belly barely showing. Vachya had never asked for a child, and when she saw the little swell of the spicer's belly, she thought in her heart that Amilcar had put it there, opening his throat to the brazen woman and letting her suckle at his grass-scented blood. Her tail burned white with shame and rage. The woman did not wake, for a Lamia's lures lull even whales to slumber, and Vachya in her fury pressed her hands to the woman's gravid belly, leaving two livid blue handprints that had faded by morning. The child was crushed to death beneath the sea serpent's palms.

Now, in some tales it is said that the child did not die, but was born deformed, a Lamia's half-breed, with three breasts and a very difficult life ahead of her, but this is surely fanciful.

When Vachya returned to her husband, she scrabbled at Amilcar's neck for the marks of his adultery, and it was not long before she could not tell the difference between the wounds of her hands and any mark the barger's wife might have left. Her sobs hitched like sailor's knots, and she threw open the closet, where the bedraggled, neglected paper-wife lay. She tore it into pieces with her hands before her husband's eyes, and swallowed each bit of music, each bit of wife, in grief and bitterness. Amilcar was shocked, but what can a

man do who married a serpent? And this tale would have ended there, with perhaps a more loyal Amilcar and a more kindhearted Vachya, had the Lamia not, just then, coughed with the last mouthful of music.

Out of her turquoise mouth came a golden coin, tinged the color of a drowned sailor's throat.



Still reeling, Amilcar stared dumbly at the coin. "Do it again!" he cried.

Vachya coughed again, and out came another gold coin. This time, she did not wish to give it to him, and bit into it as he tried to pry it from her mouth, leaving two perfectly round holes in its center.

THE RIVER PILOT'S TALE, CONTINUED

"AMILCAR BECAME VERY WEALTHY, AND KEPT his wife in cold rooms, so that her throat was always a-rattle. Eventually he built a great house on the river, and kept her in the lower rooms, near the water, where there is always a chill to rattle the chest. And thus Vachya became the first mint of Ajanabh, and Amilcar its first Duke! Even now our coins are tinged with blue, and bear those two distinctive holes in their center!"

I looked, horrified, at my captor. He beamed, having told what he considered to be an excellent story.

"I am a dragon, not a bank," I said softly.

"I keep telling you, lovely girl, you are neither."

He took me through the gate of a house with as many rooms as a river has branches lying on its floor, and he sat me near a great fire grate with a dragon's head nodding over it, stuffed like an elk's.

"Now," he said, taking my hand in his and kneeling on a spotless marble floor, "that is a dragon. It is very old and very dead. You are very young and very alive, and a maiden with hair the likes of which I have never seen. I think you are marvelous, and radiant as coins in the sun. And if you are not entirely mad, I would be happy to keep you in this house and dress you in something other than stained breeches and a shirt far too big for you and feed you soup and make you my wife."

The other members of the household seemed to think this was rather sudden, and all the city was dutifully scandalized. But I am a fish. I lay my eggs

twice a year by the dozens, and it is none of my care if they survive. If food is scarce, I will even nibble on a few—this is the nature of goldfish, the nature of rivers. Mating is easy—it hardly takes as long as lunch. I have had so many children, and I have forgotten them all, so they their own children, and their grandchildren. A goldfish has a golden heart, and with all that gold, there is no room for sentiment.

And so I married him. It seemed a rather lot of fuss just to spawn. I wore a dress like a thousand spiderwebs trailing over my maiden's body. Perhaps, I thought, a fish becoming a maiden is nearly as extraordinary as her becoming a dragon. Incense swung in censers and bearded men anointed foreheads. But then, maidens did seem to take more fuss over things than fish, and there was a wedding bed with an embroidered coverlet where there ought to have been a nice clump of twigs and a bit of shade. And instead of glistening little eggs I never had to think on again, stuck to the side of the lock, there was a big belly, and it went on for months, until I thought I would spawn forever.

But as my belly grew, my skin began to peel. I had become used to the pink and the soft, and was alarmed. I went to the doctor who lived ensconced in his rooms in the great estate, and lay on his table. He plied me with leeches and poultices for a long while, but still my skin peeled. At last some piece of my foot sloughed off its last shred of maiden skin, and beneath it, gleaming and glistening on the spotless marble floor, were three long black claws, and green scales like emerald shavings.

THE TALE OF THE CLOAK OF FEATHERS, CONTINUED

"I UNDERSTOOD IN A MOMENT." THE GOLDFISH laughed, a stream of bubbles breaking on the surface of her goblet. "After all, an infant goldfish looks more or less like a golden eyelash floating on the water—nothing like the full-grown fish. I leapt over the falls and began an infant's life. Once I had spawned, I was mature, and therefore I entered my adult phase—scales, wings, fire, and all. Did you never wonder why the old books are so full of dragons chasing after maidens? The serpents think the girls are orphans, and long to get them away in a lair so that they may grow up strong and tall."

"What happened to your child?" I said gently.

Lock shrugged, rising and falling slightly in the water. "I am afraid that during its birth I completed my molting and rose immediately from childbed and out of the great country house, my long green tail corkscrewing behind me. I bellowed fire at the moon in sheer joy—and then bellowed fire at the house, at its lowest rooms. And as I flew faster than a river barge, I glimpsed behind me something great and blue disappearing into the river.

"I flew as fast as my fishpole-wings could carry me, up into the mountains and back to my river and my lock. I thought nothing of the child. I do not even know if it was a boy or a girl. I thought nothing of its father, either. Mates do not last more than one season; that's obscene. And eggs will survive or fail in their own way. The best a mother can do is keep the males from eating them for a time, and then leave them to the river. I came here, to the other goldfish, to show them how it was done, that it could be done. I soared over the

foaming, frothing edge of the falls, my tail snapping like a green flag, my nostrils flared to taste the wind—oh! It tasted like brine shrimp and broken stones! My spine ridge ruffled white and blue, blue as the poor Lamia. I called out to them, the lock fish, the goldfish, the trout, the pike, the thorny-boned catfish, the clacking drumfish, the eels who would never lie, the bass.



"And as I cleared the waterfall, I felt my scales squeeze in, and my claws seize up, and I snapped back into a goldfish, just as quick as the flick of a fin. I fell into the pool with a loud splash."

I could not help it. I laughed, cawing against the bars of my cage. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be cruel. It must have been very sad for you."

The fish gave her piscine shrug again. "They laughed, too. But they saw me, some of them, pike and eel and trout and lock-fish. They saw that I was a dragon."

"Couldn't you leap back over?"

"I suppose. But it was not long after that that the barge men came scooping fish up in their goblets, explaining to them what they would pay and how large the glass would be, and it seemed to me very satisfactory work, tasting the river. I travel as far as any dragon on these routes. And I don't think I should like to go through the infant stage again—it was not nearly so marvelous as the last part, and I do not really like the color pink."

Lock and I had many fine conversations on the deck of the river barge, but all rivers end. This one was very long and its passage took a great many months—and it was not even half the journey to Ajanabh. When the water had finally narrowed so far as to be impassable, I had nearly forgotten I was in a cage, so kind and piccolo-cheerful was her voice, so bright were her scales in the crystal goblet. I thought often of my goose, her flapping orange feet, her hooting cry. When I wept, Lock was kind enough to look away. But she bade me farewell with a slosh of her water, and only looked sad for a moment when Kostya loaded me onto a cart, and though I bounced and flashed my tail, scorching the bars, the lock, and Kostya's hems, there was little I could do to keep myself clear of the red city. I had only to wait.

The Vareni was quite as splendid as Lock had promised, and the bridges rattled under our cart, tossing red dust into the current. But I hardly saw the colors in the glare of Kostya's yellow coat, in the gray mire of my own misery. And when he steered his cart through the Dressmaker's Parish, I was certain I knew where he had gotten that coat.

Every window and hovel door was slung with clothes, the dyes glossy and intense, even the simplest apron glowing goldfish-bright. Troughs of dye lined the streets like gutters in scarlet and yellow and blue, and a few merry folk, far too few for the number of troughs, dipped in their skirts, their trousers, their hats, their fine, long coats. Spools of costly thread stood like lampposts here and there, with a child selling lengths with her own pair of shining scissors. There were few enough people, but clothes there were in plenty. Far off there sounded laughter and screaming and jostling and spilling, the crunching of bones and the tearing of silk, the singing of songs and the dancing of feet—Ajanabh was only lately dead, and the wake still raged on. Kostya did not look at me, but stood straight and tall and proud with his prize, as a child or two stopped and stared up at me in mud-cheeked wonder. His gait was awkward—he limped, as fashionable noblemen often do, and until we came to the bell tower by the east bank of the Vareni, far from the crowd and the dresses hung up like curtains, I thought nothing of it.

The bell was whole, then, but much of the rest was as you see it, as many things are on the banks of the Vareni, following their natural inclination downward, sliding slowly into the river. Everything was boarded, broken, dusty, dim. The bell never rang and the floors creaked, and my cage was set just where you see it, and never moved again. Kostya opened his arms expansively, as if presenting me with a very great gift, wrapped up in a bow.

"This is where we shall work, my good friend. It is a lovely place, with a great many corners for hiding things in."

"What work is it you wish me to do?"

"Nothing, nothing! Sit very still while I do what I must. I should have no use for a slave of such a very great size."

And Kostya, with his gold mask gleaming beneath its peacock fringe, bent low, and plucked a single long feather from my tail. I screamed, the sudden, short pain of it; only Ravhija, my pumpkin-dear, my gardener-girl who caught

me stealing and plucked her punishment, had ever dared such a thing before. I bled and stared at him, hurt and uncomprehending. He already had me in his grasp. What could another feather avail him? It smoked and hissed against his glove. He quickly threw it up into the belly of the bell, and it remained there.



"So bright!" he cried. "Bright as Stars in the heavens!"

So it went every morning, like a clock chiming dawn. He came and plucked a feather from me, dripping scarlet blood in a circle under the bell, from whence they never returned. His glee increased with every feather, and with every feather I was weaker, wept more bitterly, until I could hardly stand in my cage, and had to be given cushions on which to lie as my tail depleted, morning by morning. The space below my cage was stained with blood and golden tears, as though someone had left a ghastly cup there on the boards.

What Kostya did with his nights I could never say. He went into the city, I presumed to drink and sing and whore as men in wigs will do. But my own nights were dark and damp and full of river sounds, the sloshing currents lapping at the stairs. There were clicking sounds in the bell, but they were no company. My tail was half plucked, my heart half dead. I longed for the glimpse of a silver feather through the tapered windows, a long neck speckled with moon. But she did not come—it was foolish to think she could come.

In my thick and knotted despair, there came a scratching noise, a clattering and a scraping. Out of the bell floated a few of my feathers. I sang happily at them, so overjoyed was I to see them again. Their flames had gone out, of course, long gone from the heat of my body, but the gold sparkled still. After them came a long length of pale thread, and along this came a quiet brown spider, the size of a child's fist, whose legs were eight delicate, glittering needles, their eyes jutting out sharply at the joints where they met her thin true legs, and in each eye trailed threads of scarlet and gold.



"Good evening, oh fabric of mine, oh spinner of my best silks," said the spider in a voice like pages rubbing together. Her manifold eyes

regarded me seriously.

"You must be mistaken, for I am quite sure that you are the spinner of silks between us."

"On the contrary," she said, swaying a little on her silky lead, "Kostya has asked me to make him a cloak of feathers, the brightest the world has seen, and you are my cloth, my model, my thread, and my pattern all together."

I looked at her in horror. "Why would you agree to such a thing?"

She shrugged. "Kostya has always paid me well—and well he might. We have known each other since I was barely out of my egg sac and he was adorned in whiskers and fur. I am Sleeve, the Bell Spider, famed the Parish over for my gowns and jackets. Who would not come to me with such a commission? Who else would do the materials justice?"

"I am not materials," I said quietly, my eyes cast to the ring of tears and blood.

"This is Ajanabh," she answered, her voice stitched thick with apology. "Everyone is materials." And at this she waved four of her needle-legs.

"Did Kostya do that to you? Did he make a little bracelet of your legs?"

"How funny you are! No, of course he didn't. I am a recluse spider. It is an apt name, and indicates the poisons of my body, besides. No one could sever my legs did I not ask them to…"

THE DRESSMAKER'S TALE

ANOTHER CREATURE'S TALE IS LIKE A WEB: IT spirals in and out again, and if you are not careful, you may become stuck, while the teller weaves on.

Did I become stuck in Kostya's tale, or did he become stuck in mine? It is confusing, and so I will begin with mine, and perhaps somewhere along the strand we will snare him.

The first thing I remember was glass. I was caught under glass with a few dozen others as brown and small as I—perhaps siblings, perhaps not. One cannot really smell the egg sac after a few days, and though we might have been brothers and sisters, we easily might have not. Who can say? But what I saw from that squirming, thronging glass was a long table with a tall cup standing on it, holding up a stack of books, a cup of horn, all twisted red and black and yellowed white.

Each day he would scoop some of us out and crush us in his mortar, mixing in rose and snake scale and whatever else he could think of. He would pour this mixture into the cup and drink it down, savoring and considering each concoction. Now, even as an infant I was a clever thing, as spiders must be to find their web rafters and their suppers so soon after their mother crawls back into the dark. We are born with the knowledge of poison beating hard in us—we taste it; of course we taste it. Do you not know the taste of your own mouth, your own spit, your own blood? So do we, and know it well. He could have been at no other trick than poisoning, with so many of us crushed in his bowl, twitching legs brushing weakly at the rim.

I have no grudge against poisoners, being one myself, but nor did I greatly desire to become a tool of his trade. And so, when he came for me, with his dry, thin fingers groping under the glass, I was ready, and scurried up his reaching arm, all the way to his neck, and sank my fangs in him as quick as a snapping web strand, before he could even cry. When I am very angry, I sometimes have a second bite to give, and this too I gave gladly to him, with a high, whispering shriek of triumph, and two red points of blood on his cheek.

I am quick. I am merciful. He thrashed like a drowning man, and out of his skin came snaking vines—I have since been very careful, in case all men have these whipping things hiding in their skin. Out snarled holly and thorn apple and ivy, reaching to find and strangle and save. But I am too small for such blunt limbs, and they never touched me. One lashed out, a blackthorn branch, and shattered the cup of horn, which had held so many spider broths—and a terrible, sorrowful sound filled the room, like the last gasping note of a song that had once dreamed of forests, and storms, and lightning brighter than love. I shuddered as it died away in the room's stale air. But I cannot really mourn a cup.

Away from his purpling corpse I and some few others ran, into the world and the light. Having been captive since as near to birth as makes the difference of one strand of thread to another, I was not properly socialized, and unsure of what a spider ought to do with her time.

I asked the crickets in the Glassblowing District, and they said:

"We suspect it is proper and right that a spider should rub her legs together and make a very nice sort of music which fills up the night air and draws mates from all corners, green and black and handsome!"

I tried to rub my legs together, but no music of any kind came from them, only a dry sort of scraping. I asked the moths in the Bird-keepers' Ward, and they said:

"We suspect it is right and proper for a spider to seek out the flame wherever it lies, and bask in its light."

I went then to the Candle-makers' Quarter and there found more flame than tallow, but I found it very hot and uncomfortable, and when a foreleg began to smoke, I in my wisdom retreated.

I asked the flies in the Calligrapher's Close, and they considered for a very long while, keeping far back from me—I did not know why.

"We suspect it is proper and right for a spider to eat flies," they stuttered, "but we do not advise it. Perhaps it is more proper and more right for a spider to weave beautiful alphabets, as a calligrapher does, or beautiful dresses, as a tailor does. We do not know, but we seem to recall that weaving is the essential thing. Now please leave us alone."

I shrugged, and set about locating a calligrapher who would take me as an apprentice. I suspected the flies, like the moths and the crickets, were silly, flighty things who knew no more of spiderhood than I did, but without a map, all roads seem equal.

I asked the squid in their tanks, all a-flush with ink.

"We have no use for a spider," they gurgled. "You are extremely drownable, and it would be impolite of us to ask you to work in our element. Try the humans."

I asked the man in the high shop with a hat of blue and buckles, who penned careful manuscripts all through the night.

"I have no use for a spider," he coughed. "You are extremely crushable, and it would be impolite of me to ask you to work beside my careless hands. Try the Sirens."

I crawled beneath the door of a room at the highest floor of the highest tower in Ajanabh outside the Duke's estate, a drafty, cold place—cold! In Ajanabh! But there it was, the tower so high that the air itself shook with a terror of the heights. Within the rooms, the windows creaked and trembled with their own dread of the sheer walls, and three women blinked at me in wonder and hunger.

They had women's legs, and so I call them women, but from the waist, brown feathers overtook the skin, and the upper parts of them were sparrows, great, tottering beaks and long page-brown wings tipped in black folded neat as elbows at their sides. Their huge, wet black eyes regarded me with an early bird's right to breakfast, and I tucked my legs in quickly.

"Please! Do not eat me! I come to learn the art of letters—I can weave and spin as well as any, and I will stitch whatever words you ask me!"

The birds looked at each other and said nothing. Instead, they extended their wings and began to turn, a strange, hopping, sinuous dance that looped each one out of the embrace of the other, ducking under one wing and hopping with bare, grimy feet over the pirouetting leg of another. Their backs arched and bent, their wings dipped down low and fluttered wide, tracing circle after circle. I watched them in awe, their sure steps, their constant touch —never was there a moment when one Siren did not have her wing or her toe on another of her sisters. When they stopped, they looked expectantly at me, as if they had spoken, as if I was now sure to answer, if I was not a very rude creature.

Then I looked at the floor.

It was covered in paper from wall to wall, fine, creamy paper soft as silk rugs, and upon it, with feet and wings which I could see now were dark not with mud but with ink, they had written:

But we find spiders delicious.

"I find many things delicious, but if I were to eat all of them I would be as big as a baker's pan."

The trio danced again, their beaks turned up to the ceiling and down, their wings whipping, snapping, flicking at the paper floor.

This is wise. But do you really think you could dance with us? Your penmanship would be so tiny, so intricate, only the very dedicated would wish to read it.

"I have been told it is proper and right for a spider to weave—either alphabets or dresses, the flies were unclear—and dresses are so very big."

We have never heard of a spider-calligrapher.

"I have never heard of Sirens who do not speak."

The women blinked again, one after the other, six eyes sliding closed and open again. And then they began to dance in truth, a swift, urgent dance that bent them close to the floor, their wings tapping and flipping at the paper, letters forming like shapes in water, long and lithe and exalted, their toes gently tipping an *i* here and a *j* there, their leaps elongated and graceful, sometimes spanning the room entire—but they never broke with each other, staying as close and tight as a flock of migrating birds, racing over the page, their movements alien and aching and radiant.

This is what they wrote:





THE TALE ON THE FLOOR

WE SANG TOO LONG; WE SANG TOO WELL. WE are sisters in silence now: It is our vow and our penance.

Once we had a nest in the open wind, on the open sea—how gray was that sea of our youth! How soft and thick was that nest we built! How long ago it was, how long ago it seems to us now, how much we have seen since we walked on our spit of stone and called each other sisters! But we are old now, we are old, and there is no sand anymore between our toes. How long since we sang innocent ballads on the shore, sharp and well turned, how long since we opened our throats in the rain and called it harmless.

Our nest was then threshed of straw and juniper and loose, waving cotton flowers, driftwood and scallop shells and sandpiper bones. Long dune grasses crisscrossed themselves within, and there we slept in each other's arms, heads tucked under our wings, and were warm, and were not wicked, no matter what they say.

And in our joy, as we picked our way among the tide pools, sucking the orange flesh from mussels and closing up the anemones with our wing tips, as our legs grew blue and goose-pimpled with the ocean spray, we sang. We sang dizzy waltzes about the moon who breathes so deeply that she draws the whole sea into her, and blows it out again. We sang dirges for our mother, buried at sea when we were chicks with pink toes. We sang dirges for our father, whom we never knew. We sang tarantellas and danced them on the coral boulders until our feet bled. We were happy together in those days, and

knew nothing of the world, innocent as mice, slurping fish from their bones and looking at the sky through our joined feathers.

Do you know what it means to sing? Are there songs of the spiders, gossamer and glissand? It means to open up your mouth and unstop your chest and push your heart, your blood, your marrow, and your breath out of you like children. We opened up our mouths and unstopped our chests and pushed our hearts and blood and marrow and breath out of us, and the songs were all our nieces and daughters, lying among us and giggling at the wind.

Then she washed up on our spit of stone. How beautiful we thought her! How blue her lips were! How strange her skin, how odd her hair, seaweed-strangled! How we watched her, how we prodded, like a dolphin beached, our drownèd girl! She had a sailor's clothes, her shirt torn open, and—we did not know humans were made so!—there was a large compass needle waving northward in her navel, pointing up toward her chin. There was rust at the tip, like blood. Her boots were full of water—there were barnacles on the heels, and we pinched her and nudged her and rolled her over, and we sang to her—how we sang to her! What did we not sing to the drownèd dear? Warm, skipping minuets, thrilling ballads of narwhal hunts and octopus cities under the waves, crooning lullabies of children well held and tears never shed, all those we had from our mother so-long-dead!

Wake up, girl! we sang, but blue she stayed.

The tide is coming in! Now is no time for sleeping! we sang, but cold she stayed.

Wake up, sailor-love! Ghadir has you, Ashni has you, Nyd will not let you drink the whole sea down! we sang, and she coughed, she groaned, she made the sounds a sailor does when it does not want to wake up. Her eyes opened, and they were miraculously blue. We had never seen anything with blue eyes, though Mother's songs said that such things might exist very, very far away. Her hair was black and plastered to her back, wet as a fish's fin, and her face was ashen, tired, drawn as a crone's.

"Why do you sing me back, you awful old cat-bait, when first you sang me down?" she croaked.

"What do you mean?" Ghadir chirped.

"It was your song I followed, your song that filled up my mouth with salt and sea…"

THE NAVIGATOR'S TALE

I STEER THE SHIPS BETWEEN AJANABH AND THE northern passage, I chart their way between the shoals, between the shallows and the deeps, between the sunlit sea and the darkest tide. I am their true beacon, a light house the ship carries with her, never trusting the shore to give one over when it is most needed. My sextant is their chapel altar while we are at sea, and at its brass wheels and at its inky angles they pray as fervently as they have prayed in all their days.

Which was never too fervently in Ajanabh.

It is easy work, now. We go north so often, to the floes and the fishing villages and the whales blowing the sea into a mist over their singing heads. I know the route so well, as well as I know my own body—and that I know as well as I know the sea, for it was mapped and charted like a peninsula buffeted by storms the day I became a compass.



There is a woman in Ajanabh who will do this sort of work. Her workshop is difficult to find, but I can navigate a street as well as a strait. And when I say she does this sort of work, what I mean is that you will tell her what you want to do, and she will tell you what to pay, and then she will grant your wish in the strangest way she can think of, usually having to do with cutting into some part of your body and fashioning you into the tool of your desire. This is how the mind of Folio clicks along in its way: better a golden limb than a flesh one which may fail.

What did I ask? The navigator's prayer: that I should never be lost. Hers is a Djinn's interpretation, I'll grant you. What did she take from me in return? She listened at my navel for the first things my mother said to me while I lay in a cradle of ships' prows—she said you can hear it like the ocean. *I will never let you set foot in the sea,* my mama had whispered, *or you will leave me alone and crying, as he did.*

And then the surgeon took my sextant, and the new compass in my stomach spun, unable to find north for shock and grief. My sextant was to me brother and lover and trusted guide, and it was gone, into her shop like a piece of junk metal.

I had another easily, but it was long and long before I liked it as well. I looked at it on my cabin shelf with disgust and suspicion, until it seemed no longer so alien and the scabs of my stomach peeled away, and then I took out my maps again.

It is easy work, as I have said. The immigrants are thick as oranges on the winter trees these days. They say the fields are failing, holding on to their green shoots like jealous bankers, and those who are wise will go. I am not wise, but the going and the leaving are my profession, and Ajanabh simply the port where my pay is held in my name.

We set out for Muireann-port two weeks ago, our hold full of rum and lemons and little books with pictures children ought not to see—and families, huddled and shivering-sick, who had never heard of a coat of fur, soft with southern sunlight. I have seen so many like them. Did one couple have a little daughter, wide-eyed and silent in the rocking waves? I am sure one did. Did another have a parcel of boys, wrists tied one to the other to keep them together? I am sure of this, too, but it does not mean I can remember their names.

My map covered my table like a dinner cloth, and all those continents and islands and fjords and bays were my salad and soup and supper and scallion, and I was well pleased, my stomach peaceably north-pointed, my sextant safe on its shelf. I had charted so safely and so well, my equations were neat as bride-clothes, and we would not go near the Sirens' shoals, nowhere near.

Some few of the men talked of hearing those songs when we sat out on watch with the stars like a school of minnows overhead, and the creak of the

boards and the splash of the sea against the old strong hull. We smoked pipes of silver, and baleen, and plain corncob, and played dice for the lemons and the rum rations. Sturgeon-sour, the first mate always lost, and had a head full of empty tooth sockets for his pains. But still he played, and still did I, and still did we all. And the helmsman said through his juice-sticky beard:

"Galien, I swear to you, I heard it once! I was a-mending the mast, and it came over the waves like the beam of a lighthouse, sweeter than nothing, singing of my sister and her new baby they all say looks just like me, toddling around with a wooden ship in his fat little hand! They were singing of the time my sister said she was proud of me, that even though our dad said I was a shame to him, what with me not being married and not being rich and not being sober and not being much of anything but an old rot holding a wheel, still I was no shame to her nor her boy, and every time I come home she'd have me a chicken roasted crisp, because I was her brother, and she loved me dear as diamonds. How do you like that?"

"I don't like it, you lying fisherman. How did they know a thing about your sister?"

"How should I know? But I know what they were singing, and I'll tell you more: It was my sister's own voice come over the waves. I jumped after it—you can't hear love singing on the wind when you've been at sea eight months and more, you can't hear it and not go after it, your heart breaking like a jib mast all the while—I jumped after it and got my leg tangled up in the rigging, and hung there for an hour before Captain caught me out, and no rum for me for a week. But I heard them. I heard my sister singing and the chicken roasting at home, and I know what I know."

"Boys," I said, laughing, "I think I can say safe as salmon run that the helm is drunk and ought to be relieved of his lemons immediately."

There was laughter of the kind that haunts ship decks after midnight, and the helmsman shook his hoary head.

"You got no soul in you, Galien. Take us close again, so I can hear my sister sing."

"Your sister is teaching her son his numbers in a hearth-hot house. She's not out here in the dark and wet, bless her."

And so I charted well away from the shoals. But the sea is a funny thing, you know. Sometimes she wants you somewhere and it doesn't matter what your maps say at supper, she'll carry you where she pleases. And if you are not properly respectful of her, or call her names she doesn't like, or give away your sacred tools like they're scraps of paper, she'll drop you at the very place your sextant was quite clear about having no desire to go.

The mist came up like a hand in our faces, and we could see nothing around us. I went up to the crow's nest to try to get a clear sightline of the shore, but it was no good at all. I saw nothing but gray and the occasional gull—which told me we were not too far out—but beyond that I and my sextant were lost as children in a wood.

And then I heard it.

I heard my mother singing. I heard her hushing, quiet-darling voice, off-key as it had always been, lowered by pipes and beer. I heard a baby murmur in her arms, and I heard her rock it to sleep. I heard her sing about the sea, how blue and bright, how much like the body of a wife, and how all lovers leave when they see the whitecaps foam. I heard her sing about my father, who had red hair—imagine it! Red as a heart! Who would think such a thing existed in the world? About my father and his tall ship, and his sextant, and his lilies at the door, about the necklaces of coral and bone he brought her from savage lands, and about his salt skin under her mouth. I heard her sing about the empty dock and the empty bed and prayers for safe passage. I heard her sing about a ship that never came back, and a woman standing every day at the dock for years and more. I heard her sing about a daughter who would grow up to bake bread in a shop and never see the blue or the bright, a daughter who would hold her old gray head and tell her she had been a good mother to her all her days and nights.

I heard my mother weeping—*I heard her*—and you can't hear your mother weeping and not go to her, you just can't. I dove into the water, well clear of the rigging, and the splash was like a hanging, so cold and so hard, and the fish scattered in horror at the woman dropped into them, hook-sudden.

I could still hear her, echoing and dim, under the water, under the mist.

"Mama!" I cried, and water stopped up my voice.

But there was an arm around my waist like a mother's arm, and a hand on my hair like a mother's hand, and a voice in my ear nothing like a mother's voice, but sweet and sad and deep.

"Why do you folk always listen?" it said with a sigh, bubbling up to the waves above.

We broke the water far from my ship, fading in the distance, and a great, huge seal held me on his belly like an otter, looking at me with depthless black eyes.

"Let me go! My mother is calling, my mother is crying!"

The seal wrinkled its muzzle. "No, she's not. She is drinking herself dizzy somewhere you cannot so much as guess. You are wet and pitiful and lost, and I have found you, but that is only luck, and luck rarely holds. Now, I will take you to dry land, for I am a kind seal and a good one. But you must answer me this, as I have been answered by every foolish sailor who finds himself overboard: Do you know of a Satyr who serves on a ship, with very big green eyes and curly hair?"

"No, friend, I have heard of no such beast."

The seal heaved a sigh and squinted in the fog. "That is to be expected. I am always answered the same. I ran from her, and that is the truth. I do not deserve to find her again. I ran from the forest and the gold slanting through the oak and the yew and the birch and the pine, I ran from the giggling streams and the grapevines fat and purple, I ran from the hoof-worn paths and the mushrooms sprouting in the shade, I ran from the loam and the leaves, I ran from her. I said a great number of foolish things which seemed wise then and I clutched my skin to my chest, and I ran all the way to the sea, smiling and singing and my feet weren't even tired, all the way to the sand and tide. I leapt into the froth and the wave, the sea beating me back, the waves pulling at my waist. I shouted to the wind and the pelicans, I was so full of salt and my skin was so slick and eager!

"It all seems rather silly now. As soon as I tasted the sea I knew it was no good. I had too much of her in me. It only tasted of tears. And one day a red ship sped by overhead and I knew it for her; I knew she was above me, stomping the boards with her hooves. I followed, but the ship was so fast. I followed all the way to the edge of the Boiling Sea, and there I could not go.

But I am patient; I waited. I followed them to the Skin-Peddler's Isle and I followed them into the icy seas where they were swallowed whole. And there too I followed. I beat the sea with my hands for weeks before the turtle-whale came up and gobbled me down with her. But his belly was so wide. I looked and looked among the old wrecks but I could not find her. I lay down on the liver of the beast and prayed to die. Time passed in the dark and I did not mark it. When the great fluttering of birds came and his mouth opened, I did not even look up, so far was I from those curtains of baleen. It was only when the awful old beast caught his belly on a reef and retched most everything in him up onto the tide that I escaped. I looked among the flotsam for the shard-planks of a red ship, but found nothing.



"But I have heard rumors of that ship in the harbors and ports again. I know she is alive; I know she crests the waves." The seal smiled softly. "Who would have thought she would go to sea? If I had known, if I had been a cleverer beast, if I had been older, less silly, I would have built her a house on the shore, and fed her black bread and sardines, and we might have been happy. There are many ways of being happy. We might have found ours."

"I am sorry." I gently touched his face. "I have heard of no such ship, no such beast. Even the Boiling Sea has dried to a long, white, dry bed with no water in it at all now. We must steer around that wasteland, where shark skeletons litter the blasted seafloor."

He nodded miserably. "Well I know it. But still I ask. There is no shortage of sailors flying off their boats like great ungainly albatrosses. One of them will be from her ship one day. I know it."

THE TALE ON THE FLOOR, CONTINUED

"He was a Selkie," our sailor finished, "and a Selkie dare not approach the shore. He dragged me as far as he could, and pointed my body at the land, and told me to swim. But"—she coughed, and seawater sprayed from her mouth—"I have never been a strong swimmer. I sail; I do not swim. I swallowed the ocean, and deep in the dark, in the bottom of the bottomless dark, I heard my mother singing again. I heard her telling the baby in her arms to wake up."

We looked at each other, blinking, perplexed. "Your mother is not here. Our mother is not here. This is a motherless place."

Galien sat up with difficulty, propping herself on her elbows. "Of course she isn't. You're here. Didn't you listen to me at all? You sing, and we hear. We hear everything we long for. Do you know how many of us have died diving into the brine after your voices? On every map your isle is marked as danger, as wicked, as a place never to dream of going."

Nyd's beak began to quiver. She tried not to cry. "That's ridiculous," Ashni said, stamping her bare foot. "We sing to each other. Every creature is allowed to sing. The songs were not for you. We did not go fishing for sailors, dropping our voices into the sea like barbed hooks. We push out our hearts and blood and marrow and breath—"

"You dash out our hearts and blood and marrow and breath on these desolate rocks, and no one survives your song," the navigator whispered.

"But we did not mean to. We did not intend it. Our songs were for us alone," Ghadir said, her face ashen.

Nyd fell to her knees, and her sobbing echoed over the shoals. She laid her feathered head on the rocks and cried over and over: “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

We carried Galien home. In the tangle of our legs she flew as no woman has ever done, and in Ajanabh we left her, to collect her pay and buy her mother beer and see her old helmsman’s sister with her roasted chickens. Her eyes were bruised and her lips were broken and bleeding, and the high, thin air did not help her. She was hollow-eyed and bent when we set her down trembling on the red rooftops. Her navel-compass waved erratically, and she slapped it into submission.

“We will never sing again,” said Nyd, her voice shaking, as we stood with Galien among the chimneys and the steam pipes, the tiles and the pigeons’ nests. We held her between us, wing to wing, and the navigator’s eyes had no grace for us. “We will never speak again. This is our vow. We will call to no one, not even ourselves, and in years to come perhaps the drowned will call us forgiven.” Her black eyes overflowed with tears; her beak began an anguished clattering. “But I doubt it,” she finished.

THE DRESSMAKER'S TALE, CONTINUED

THE SIRENS STOPPED THEIR DANCE WITH THE three of them spinning in unison over the final characters. They were bathed in sweat, their feathers sticking wetly together like newborn butterflies' wings. They panted, stretched their exhausted feet, mopped one another's brow. The floor was black with writing, and I finished reading some time after they finished their dance. The one I presumed was Nyd was hitching her chest, nearly weeping again with the memory of it.

We never meant it, she wrote by herself in a small corner. *How could we mean such a thing? We were just singing.*

"I think," I said hesitantly, "that a Siren sings as a cricket does."

No one drowns in a cricket's song, Nyd scribbled hurriedly.

Besides, wrote another of the sisters, *the silence helps us to work. We see the world in our calligraphy now, and if we were forever squawking and cawing, we should not know the song of silent letters.*

The sisters allowed that if I did not scurry too quickly, and therefore look to them like breakfast, I might be permitted to work on the marginalia. I stepped into their inkstone, wetting my feet in the black iron-gall, in the sepia, in the costly blue. I tried very hard, as hard as a spider may try. I danced masterpieces of tiny points in their corners and frontispieces. I wove my silk into pages so strong they might never tear, and they marveled at how soft the webbing was beneath their callused feet.

But I was not happy. I was often underfoot—a dangerous place for me—and they looked at me sidelong when supper was scarce. The silence clawed. I wished for the buzz of flies and the splash of water and voices, just a few harried voices to break the thick quiet. I did not feel that I was a weaver so much as a very poor painter, and the heights made my head hurt.

It seemed to me time to seek out a truer expression of the flies' commandment. While the sisters slept, I dipped my legs in blue ink and spun in the margins of their latest manuscript a panorama of farewell against a calm and easy sea: sailor after sailor, standing safe on the shore, whole and singing.

In the Garden

THE BOY FELT HER EYES ON HIS BACK AS HE WALKED BACK TOWARD the Palace and a bed which had no snowflakes in it, no cold and no hardnesses. His vision was so full of her, full of her dark eyes dancing, full of the words he could now taste in his mouth like cakes.

"Come to her wedding," he had said.

"I can hardly avoid it," she had answered him.

"I will come away from the crowd, and I will find you, and how clever we shall be, to meet with all such folk about!"

"Be sure that in your cleverness you come far enough away."

But a thought had begun in him, like a flame which smokes and sparks before blooming into gold. He was not sure he dared—but how the smoke filled his chest! How it prickled and burned and billowed! He felt his heart catching; he felt himself beginning to burn.

And so it was that the boy who would one day be Sultan went into his sister's chamber the night before she would become a wife and a foreigner in one blow. Dinarzad sat at her mirror, and her hair was all unbound, falling around her like a desert tent, and before her on her little mahogany table were cloths stained with red and gold and dark blue. Her eyes were tired; her lips were thin.

"I am so tired of all this paint." She sighed. Her nightdress was laced tight around her, like armor. "I cannot breathe for its stink."

"I am sorry," the boy said.

“It is not your fault. Are you not glad? Another night and you will be rid of me.”

“If you are glad, I am glad,” he answered carefully.

“It does not matter if I am glad.”

She was quiet then, looking at herself in the mirror. “You may brush my hair if you like,” she finally said, awkward and hushed.

The boy went forward and took her bone-handled brush. He ran it through her hair, afraid at first to snarl it, to hurt her, but she made no sound. He smoothed her black hair with his hands, amazed at the heat of her scalp. He had never touched her so before.

“What…” Dinarzad cleared her throat, her voice faltering somewhat, like a bird who has not enough breath to finish a song. “What do you think happened to the Papess? Was she happy, do you suppose, in her tower when the war was done? Was she bitter? Did she rip books apart with her teeth and plot against the others? Did she rail like a caught tiger in that place? Did she throw herself from the tip of the tower? Did she go to sleep and never wake up? Did she wake up one morning and find that her heart was as white as a silkworm, and the sun was golden on the sill, and did she then believe that she could live, and hold peace in her hand like a pearl?”

The boy started. “I… I do not know. She has not told me.”

“If she does, when I have gone,” Dinarzad said thickly, “come to me in whatever Palace I live then, and tell me how it was with her.”

It was then that his sister crumpled into his young arms and wept. “I am afraid,” she whispered, over and over. “I am so afraid.”

He stroked her hair as he had seen their nurses do to the children, and in his heart he cursed his own unkindness toward his sister, poor lost beast that she was. Her shoulders stopped their jerking and shivering after a time, and she looked up at him with red and wretched eyes.

“Tell me, my brother, tell me a story. Tell me a tale in which a woman is wed, and her husband is kind to her and no cold stranger, and the other wives love her as they would a sister. Tell me a tale in which a woman is wed and her children are beautiful and whole, and live a long while, and her sister-wives teach her to make bread in the fashion of their country. Tell me a tale where she wakes one morning and finds that her heart

is white as a silkworm, and the sun is golden on the sill, and she then believes that she can live, and hold peace in her hand like a pearl. Tell me a tale in which a woman is wed, and she is happy."



The boy's lip trembled, and there was pity in him like a strangling vine. He knelt at Dinarzad's bare feet, and held her hands in his.

"I do not know any stories like that," he whispered.

"Neither do I." She sighed. "But it is not impossible that such tales are told."

Brother and sister sat with their heads together, and after a long while the boy told her of the thing which smoked and sparked in him, and she did not strike him or tell him he was foolish, and he loved her in that moment, his sister with her beautiful hair and her cold, thin fingers.



The morning of the wedding came white as a silkworm, and the snow drifted lazily down, unconcerned about the occasion. A skeletal sunlight shone pale through the flakes, and all the court wondered at it. The boy escaped, his arms full of boiled quail eggs and chocolate, and found the girl at the wrought Gate again, her cheeks lashed red by the cold. He told her nothing, but they smiled and laughed like old comrades, and he passed his hands eagerly over her eyes to close them.

"There are hours and hours before the wedding!" he said excitedly. "Let us find out how a spider changes her profession!"

The girl closed her eyes and lifted her chin, her breath fogging in the chill.

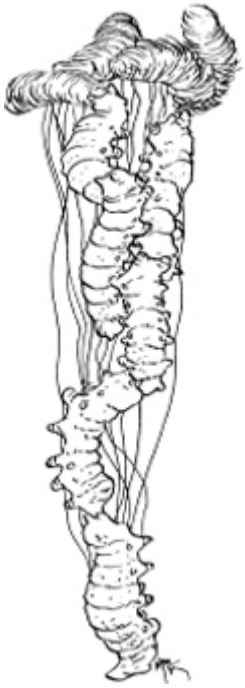
"It took me a great many days to walk to the Parish," the boy began. "Eight legs are no guard against distance, and I am, in the end, so very small…"

THE DRESSMAKER'S TALE, CONTINUED

THERE WAS A PLACE IN THE PARISH IN THOSE days which you might have thought was a church, if you were not careful. It had a carved door and a frescoed ceiling, and in the pews were parishioners, after a fashion. Where the nave should have been was a spinning wheel, and a loom, and a raised dais not unlike an altar. The windows were cast in fabulous colors, but this was not a church, and the woman who stood between the wheel and the loom was not a priest.

This was Xide's house, and even to a spider with eight legs to her name, Xide was extraordinary and grotesque. Her arms wheeled around her, one for each of mine, and there were rings of petrified wood and plain gray stone on each of forty knuckles, and each of forty fingers was occupied with needles and thimbles and cords, spindles and pedals, bolts of fabric and strips of lace, bustles and whalebone, tassels and cuff links. She was a wheel and a whirl, and I was frightened of her. In the pews were cedar boxes and in each of the cedar boxes was a silkworm busily spinning away, the thread draped over the benches, flowing up to the altar, through copper bowls brimming with dye of every shade, and to her. They looked up at their mistress from time to time in the mute adoration of which blind worms are capable, and, satisfied that their goddess remained yet among them, exuded another tiny length of precious, wet thread.

I passed through all of these fragrant boxes unseen and unmarked, up toward Xide whose face shone among her arms, whose web-white hair was



bound severely back. I watched her weave and my legs twitched in unison with her—they longed to touch such cloth, to make such miracles of cotton and silk. I was rapt; I was held.

On the dais at that moment was a woman whose nose was very long and highborn, and Xide was spinning a red dress around her even as I watched, culling silk from the rows of cedar boxes and spinning it into fabric faster than my vision could catch. The woman was naked beneath the growing dress, holding up long strands of black beads in tented fingers so that they would not be caught in the rushing skirt.

Everywhere I had asked where I might learn to weave properly, I heard Xide's name, whispered, murmured in reverence. I called her name out then, and two of her hands ceased their motion, shading her eyes as she gazed into the distance, trying to find the sound.

"Xide, it is I, I am here, on the floor," I cried.

"Hello, Spider. I am afraid I do not know any patterns for your body, but if you wait, I will try."

The woman in her half-built dress laughed. A pearl fell out of her mouth. One of Xide's hands caught it deftly, and tossed it into a bowl already half full of white gems.

"No, I do not need clothes. I wish to be like you, to learn to weave. I have been told it is the proper profession for a spider. I wish to be proper."

"My silkworms might be jealous," she mused. "And I suspect, not being yet a proper spider, you know nothing of weaving beyond base instinct."

I hung my head. "I am sure that is true."

"Come closer, Spider."

I crawled up to her knee, which seemed so great and hard beneath me. Her face loomed huge above, young as a bride's, her eyes full of laughter and light—but they had no pupil and no iris, being all white, smooth as a statue's.

"Fate," she said, putting her head to one shoulder as her arms wove on, "is a blind weaver, they say. Did you know that? Have you lived long enough in the

world to hear how she cuts and spins and stitches, how she never ceases, even for a moment?"

"No, Lady."

"It is a very silly story. For one thing, I have never cut a thread in my life…"

THE WEAVER'S TALE

I SPIN EACH THREAD TO ITS NATURAL LENGTH, and when it is ended it is ended, and I exhort it to wind no farther. I do not sever it before its time, simply because it would make a neater sleeve. Everything I weave is neither more or less than what it longed to become.

I was the last to step down out of the Sky. They went down like a rain of light, and they changed in their going, and I did not wish to change. I saw nothing there I liked so well as the hole the Sky had made for me, its cool edges and its darkness. I wandered in the dark after they had gone, an orphan in an empty house. It had once been so full of light, and now the Stars that stayed hung like lanterns, far from each other and silent.

Far off in the reaches of the black there is a field of grass. I could tell you that it goes on forever, but only a child believes that anything goes on forever. But there is a place where the dark becomes speckled with light, thicker and thicker until there is nothing but light, on and on and on. These are Stars, too, these speckles, Grass-Stars who lie over the dark like blades and wait for the part of the Sky that bellied out the world to wander through and nose them, just once, just a bit, just the slightest brush of her skin. There are so many of them who chose this. I suppose you cannot blame them; they are not the only orphans who have told themselves that if they make up the house very nicely, Mother will come home.

I went walking there once, long after the bright ones left. I was lonely—can I be blamed if in the dark I went toward the thing which was brightest? I went walking, through the first swirls of Grass-Stars, their tiny faces beaming with anticipation that never wanes, never for a moment. I walked through the fields, into the marshes and the rivulets of pooled light, where the Stars were nearly to my waist, waving in nameless winds, waving in the dark. And I tried to step carefully, I tried, but they are so thick and so wide, sometimes I did step onto the grass. For that I can say I am sorry. It crumbled beneath me, falling in brilliant shards out of the Sky, sharp and screaming, falling out of the Sky like glass.

And when the shards broke—shall I say I should not have gone? Shall I say I was punished, a little lost girl who has been told not to walk in the gardens, not to ruin the flowers with her muddy feet?—when they broke their light splashed out and into my eyes, and my eyes were washed away in it, and I saw nothing but light.

I have seen nothing since but light.

But in that light I could see a kind of shape, a shape which seemed to me something like the world, and a world which seemed something like me. There were things which wove, and I could not see them, but I could see their weaving, how tiny and diamond-strung, how intricate and perfect. And I wanted to weave that way, I wanted to weave bigger things and greater things, and as this wish formed in me like a spindle gathering flax, my arms opened up into eight, and silk pooled in my belly—but I did not want to become a spider. I only wanted to weave. I stopped before I could grow small and black and many-eyed. What use are many eyes to the blind?

And so at last, I too came down from the heavens, blind and wet and small, cut through with the grass-rain, and in the place where I lay I began to weave with all my fingers, with anything I could find, with grass and leaves and branches and my own hair and mud and silk and cotton and wet wool and flax and rose thorns, stones and river water and stripped bark and tall trunks and evergreen needles: Everything I could touch I could weave.

And as I wove I could see. I could see what I wove, and no more; with all that light boiling in my eye, I could see what I wove, I could see where every stitch began, in rose-seed and flax-flower, and where it would end, rotting to

dust on the dead body of a witch laid out on her bier or cut into strips for a child's swaddling clothes in a city which did not yet even have a name. I could see the threads, I could see the warp and the weft, I could see every day a thing I wove would live. It was so big I wept, and with my weeping and my weaving my light went out into these webs, these webs which became stones and streets and cornices and bridges and alleys, towers and bells and doors and churches, cutting into each other at all the sharp, cruel angles of a web, turning and twisting around me, who sat at the center. And after a while there was no light left, and my blood went out into the weaving instead, and all the stones and streets and cornices and bridges and alleys, all the towers and bells and doors and churches ran red as they wound out of me. How it hurt! But how it sang as it came!

I have always been here. I will always be here. The red city is my weaving, and I rest in its center. Every stone and plank knows it was once in the palms of my hands. I can see where it all will end, all the way through the wind-wracked dust and red stones worn to grains of red sand. And I will be here then, too. I knew that folk would come, eventually, and marvel at this empty city, all ready for them, all laid out and beautiful as a dress. I knew that they would be hungry and cruel as little spiders, that they would walk on grass they were told to leave be, that they would weave and weave and weave, until all their days were spooled out before them, red, and bright, and bloody.

THE DRESSMAKER'S TALE, CONTINUED

"THEY CAME BEFORE THE PEOPLE DID," SAID the Weaver-Star, indicating the silkworms in their cozy boxes, "how far they must have come! Crawling on their weak, white bellies over tearing, chewing rocks! My darlings, my courtiers, who knew only that that which is woven longs for a weaver, and here lay one waiting."

The worms wriggled in ecstasy that their mistress deigned to speak of them, and the current of thread redoubled itself, singing through the bowls of dye and into her hands.

"I have no more light, and no more blood, and my silk is rare and thin these days, but they make enough for anything I might wish to weave, and we are family, they and I. I am the Empress of the Alleys; they are silk dreaming of the Stars."

I thought I would burst for love of her, then, and her white eyes filled my vision. "But if you wove all these wonders, how can you be content to weave a woman's dress? A dress is nothing!"

Xide looked at the woman on the dais, nearly dressed now, her waist swathed in crimson, crisscrossed with black ropes to match her beads, the skirt clinging to her legs and falling all the way to the floor. "I do not understand you, friend Spider. How can you say a dress is nothing? Look at her. This thread begins in my silkworms and will end in the mouth of a Manticore, who will come to every window in the Woven City and sing until she is hoarse, and her voice will sound like a flute and a trumpet playing

together, and at one particular window she will sing the saddest song she has ever sung, full of failure and sorrow and love thwarted, and searches which end in dust. It will be so terrible to hear that the whole city will weep. How can this be nothing? Tears in every flower bed, in every filthy sink! But this particular window will open and this woman will be wearing her crimson dress when she leans out, her smile so wide it would break your heart to see it. Her hair will hang down around her face, and also her beads, and when she calls out the name of the beast, a shower of pearls will fall from her mouth. The Manticore will break three stairs bounding up to her, and will bite her ever so gently on the shoulder when she knocks this woman to the floor in kittenish delight. They will grow very old together, these two: The muzzle of the one and the hair of the other will go quite gray. And when this woman—this woman, right here, whose dress you call nothing!—dies, as die she must, the Manticore will sing over her breathless body in such mourning that the city will shudder and groan and remember its first weeping, and seven suicides will fling themselves from towers in unbroachable anguish in the wake of the lion's dirge. And in grief, the Manticore will pull all her mistress's dresses from her armoire, and one by one she will tear them to pieces and eat them, for they will still smell of her, they will still taste of her, and the poor beast will not be able to bear to be apart from anything which recalls this woman whose dress was nothing."

Tears rolled down the face of the woman on the dais, her mouth hung open and she could not speak, her tears salting the dress, the beads, her breath ragged and hoarse. Yet through it she smiled, and clasped her bead-strung hands to her lips.

THE TALE OF THE WASTE, CONTINUED

THE BLACK-VEILED WOMAN AND THE LEOPARD lay curled together on the cracked earth, listening. The spotted cat lashed her tail back and forth.

"In the place where we come from, which is called Urim, no one may go clothed in anything other than the black robes and veils you see draped over my lady. We cannot, between us, imagine such a dress."

"Nor could I," said Scald, her smoke calm and flowing slowly in a circuit that began at the crown of her head and flowed all the way around to the tip of her mere-tail. "Djinn sometimes wear outlandish things, if they are Kings or Queens or Khaighas, but we can bank our flames into any sort of clothes we should desire, and more often than not this will outshine even the richest cloth. But I cannot see where the cloth of my body will end, and that would be a useful trick."

"In Urim, we know each other only by our eyes, and every window is also curtained in black."

"That would seem to me dreary and morose," the Djinn said.

"It certainly seems so to us—but then, Urim is the Funereal City, and we cannot act against our character."

The Djinn said nothing, her eyes flashing flame. She put her black hands to the bars of the cage. "Yet you are not dead, and you flee that black-slung place."

The cat smiled, in such a way as cats will smile. "The tales of the dead are all the same. We are interested in yours, who live and burn."

Scald shook her head. “You are very strange, Rend. And your mistress is stranger still.”

“So says a fire-fiend caged in iron she could surely melt anytime she wished,” answered the leopard smoothly.

“Quite so,” the Djinn said chuckling.

THE DRESSMAKER'S TALE, CONTINUED

I CANNOT UNDERSTAND WHY SHE LET ME STAY. I am a spider and no more, yet she bade me sit beside her and tell her of the glass, and the poisoner, and the poor Sirens. She never ceased her weaving, but she laughed at the right parts, and caught her breath at the right parts, just as though she heard me and could have a care for the travails of spiders.

And she called me Sleeve. She meant for me to learn the value of dresses, she said. And so I did, and I listened to her tales of each garment: the green stocking for the Monopod who would tear his sock to emerald shreds on the thorns of the saltberry trees of the Antipodes, the black coat for the Ajan undertaker who would marry the day before he died, and be both wed and buried in this coat, the wispy white dress woven almost entirely of my own silk, my humble spider's silk, for the Duke's wife who would burn it all up into ash the day her child was born, the wings woven of horsehair and rose petals for the mask-maker's son who wanted to see what Ajanabh looked like from above—these he would hide from his father under the floor, hide them for so long they would turn to dust and brown petals beneath a green carpet. I listened to the stories as carefully as I studied the patterns, and in the company of a Star I learned all that it is right and proper for a spider to do.

In the church which was not a church, there were mice. This is not really surprising, as all churches are so plagued. Outside the radiant seat where Xide wove, and the rows of silkworm boxes, the place was terribly dusty and ill kept. Dust covered everything, turned it gray and dun and dull—after all, it is a rare

celestial who will notice the state of the floor. Only I, who walked upon it, noticed. And in the corners where the mice lived, the dust was so thick and deep that if I was not careful I would sink into it like soft ash, and never be heard from again. The mice were much bigger, and walked through this fog of dust as though it were air, and saw little at all but the varying shades of dust, and became like roving drafts of dust themselves.



I spoke to them from time to time, for they were in awe of the Weaver-Star, and her worms, and her spider, and dared not approach her—but they longed to touch her, how they longed to touch her!

One was very large, his muscles trained on dust-wading. Deep in the summer evening he said to me, stroking his whiskers with gray paws:

"She is so bright!"

"I suppose she is. Imagine what she looked like in the beginning, though! All that light!"

The mouse frowned. "She is brighter than anything we know," he said.

"She is no brighter than you or I. Her light is spooled out, thread by thread."

"She is bright on the inside!" the mouse snapped irritably. "We have been talking in the dust, and we think we would like to eat her."

I could not speak for a moment, my voice closed up in horror. "Is this what becomes of living in the dust? You cannot eat her!"

"If we all bit her at once, we could."

"I will not allow it."

The mouse grinned. "You have enough poison for five, perhaps six of us if you are very angry. But the rest of us would get to drink all of her! How bright! How sweet! How bright we would become!"

"Please! You cannot! What would we be without her?"

"You may be what you like. We will be bright, bright as no mouse has dreamt!"

THE TALE OF THE KINGDOM OF MICE

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS DUST, AND IN the end there will be Dust, and in the middle there is Dust, Dust, Dust!

The Church-mice know that Dust is the substance of all possible things. We have heard that in the impossible land beyond the Church-door there are folk who believe that fire is the substance of all things, or water, or ether, or tiny specks of light no one can see. We cannot believe such folly exists.

Though there are some of us who have heard—ah, if only they had never begun to imagine such a thing!—there is a burning ball outside these walls called the *sun,* and it is the brightest thing there is.

We will eat that, too, if it exists.

In the Dust, nothing is bright. There is only the gray and the dun, and the soft, ashy smell of it brushing your whiskers at every moment. We hate it, but we did not know, for a long time, how it could be escaped. When I was a pinkie at my mother's teat, I heard the old gray uncles talking about Baldtail, who was the Viceroy of Mice in days gone by—for there can be no King of the Dust, which is all there is, which gives us life and death. The Dust is King over us all. Baldtail was brave, the bravest mouse the Dust will ever allow. He, cloaked in Dust, went forward from the Corners, as Viceroys sometimes do, being valiant rulers who do not shirk adventure. He saw the worms in their boxes—perversion!—and the threads waving, and the copper bowls which surround the Weaver. He rose up on his hind legs to peer into the bowls, to see what they

could contain, and his whiskers whickered back and forth, showering bits of Dust into the bowl.

As I have said, Baldtail was brave. And so he rashly rose up onto his tiptoes, and pulled the copper bowl over onto himself, and the dye which is the magical and alien stuff the Weaver keeps by her side soaked him from his paws to the end of his bare tail. He was Yellow from eyeball to ear-twitch, a brighter Yellow even than this thing they call the sun could possibly be. The dye washed away the Dust, and alone of all mice, Baldtail was free of it; Baldtail shed the substance of mortality and became golden.

Baldtail returned to the Dust-pillowed Corners, and told all the mice what he had seen and done. At first they recoiled from his yellow body in revulsion and terror. He hurt their eyes, which had never seen anything but Dust, and their fellow mice roving in the Dust, lumps of gray among the gray. But there Baldtail blazed! Yellow! Can you imagine the uproar, the consternation? There were now *two* things in the universe: Dust and Yellow!

The more the mice looked at Baldtail, the more they envied him. One or two ventured to lick his gleaming fur with their pink tongues flashing through Dust-covered teeth. He tasted so bright, they said. So bright, and so warm. For his part, Baldtail exhorted us to go forth too and discover the bowls for ourselves.

"The Weaver sees nothing but her thread and her worms!" he argued. "She will not hurt us! Become bright! Become other than Dust!"

But we were afraid of the Weaver then. She seemed so very large and cunning. But it was decided that we should become bright, after all, and so we all agreed in the corners of the Corners to eat Baldtail all up, and then we should all be Yellow, and triumph over the Dust. We way-laid the Viceroy in the thickest, dankest mires of Dust, and with our teeth tore him haunch from long, bald tail. He tasted like any other mouse.

But oh, how it felt! We could feel his brightness in us, his Yellow. It slid in our bellies like butter, like we dreamt the sun would slide. Those of us who ate of Baldtail were exalted among mice, and we began to think as no other mouse had done before: What if there were more than two things in the universe? What if there were more than Dust and Yellow? We could not begin to calculate what these things might be, but we hungered for more brightness, for

more light, for more Yellow! Those mice who had not tasted Yellow mourned their loss, and they were more eager than any of us to find these other things.

Some few of them went out from the Corners and tilted her bowls over their heads. They came running back, scampering with glee, to show us that a thing called Green existed, too, and also the almost unfathomable Purple! We gasped, we choked in awe and ecstasy, we could not believe the universe had room for these things and also Dust. And we leapt upon them and slurped Green and Purple from their fur like meat from bone—of course we slurped meat from bone, too. Those were heady days—I cannot begin to tell you of the Feast of Red!

But we do not wish to waste any more time lapping at her bowls. Why beg for crumbs when the roast is in plain sight? We know that the Weaver is the source of all Yellowness, all Greenness, all Purpleness, all Redness, all that is not Dust, and we will eat her up as we ate up Baldtail, and Blackwhisker, and Dustbelly, and Manglepaw, and how bright we shall be then!

THE DRESSMAKER'S TALE, CONTINUED

THE MOUSE LICKED HIS CHOPS AND WRUNG HIS gray paws. "What will she taste like? Will she taste like mouse?"

I trembled under his hungry stare. "I have seen the sun, and the streets, and the world outside the Church-door. Why do you not go into it? I will wedge the door open for you, and you may go in all your numbers into the light, and see for yourself what the universe is made of, how many other things than Yellow and Green and Purple and Red. Do you know what Blue is?"

"No! Would it be difficult to chew?" The mouse grinned, his dusty teeth showing.

"Yes, very." I tapped my hind legs desperately, my belly pained and anxious. "But come, friend mouse!" I said with as much joviality as I could manage. "Xide is hardly worth your effort! She is all wrung out, an old cloth! Come with me, into the world outside the Church-door, and all your brethren, too, and I will show you the very brightest things there are! I will weave whatever you like into beauty and color and light! And you will find that you can be brighter than lamps without eating anything untoward. There are so many roads to brightness."

The mouse looked doubtful. "I have heard that in the world outside, it is easy to become Stepped Upon, or Swatted with a Broom. We wish to be bright! We wish to be bright and great, so that no one may Step Upon us, or do anything to us with Brooms!"

I considered this for a long time, tears forming in my manifold eyes. “I think I know how you may have all you like, and still leave the Weaver in her place, uneaten and unknown.”

I went to Xide and rested in the hollow of her elbow, as full of sorrows as a web of flies—for now I knew, being a proper spider, what flies were for, and webs, and I understood why the flies had not wanted to speak to me. I told her all I had heard, and all I intended. She smiled sadly, her white eyes gleaming, and let her lips fall—ever so gently!—onto my back. It felt like moonlight, and I was at peace.

I began to weave many things in preparation for my leaving, for the exodus of the mice kingdom. First I wove green stockings, and soled green boots in pew-wood. I wove a long black wig of glossy curls. I sent to the Mask-makers’ Slums for a mask of gold and peacock feathers. And because they begged for it, I wove, over days and weeks and months and years, for a spider is still small, and no Star, a long jacket all of yellow, with gold thread at every seam.

THE TALE OF THE CLOAK OF FEATHERS, CONTINUED

"THEY PRACTICED WHILE I WOVE, PRACTICED piling one mouse onto another in extraordinary shapes: first a cat, because they are perverse, and then a dog, then a wolf, then a lion, and then, when they could open a mouth of mice and roar in such a way that it terrified the rafter doves and sent a rain of white feathers to the floor, they carefully built themselves into the form of a man, and on their squirming shoulders I helped them arrange their yellow coat, and around their crawling head I strapped their mask of gold, and onto their wriggling legs I pulled stocking and boot. They elected the mouse who had struck the deal with me to be the voice of their golem. He asked me to give them a good name which had nothing to do with whiskers or tails or paws. I suggested Kostya, the name of the undertaker. Perhaps this was wishful on my part.

"'But you will leave Xide be?' I asked desperately.

"'If you keep us supplied with diverting brightnesses, we will surely let her live,' Kostya allowed magnanimously.

"And so I keep them in colors, and they leave the heart of Ajanabh unmolested. I give them a cloak of your feathers, and beg your forgiveness, but I cannot let the smallest tooth nibble at her hand."

Sleeve sniffled a bit and pulled one of her needle legs upward sharply, tightening a golden thread. "As for my legs, you must have guessed by now. Folio did it, who authors all the wonders of Ajanabh, of which I am but a small and secret member. I asked her to, I begged her to, to be worthy of Xide—and

in this you will find a common tale in every quarter and Parish of the city. I paid her with more of my silk than I have ever spun out of my body—I was near dead with the effort, but she needed so much, to improve her daughter's joints, you see." Sleeve clacked her forelegs together merrily. "It is strange to think how much of her child is made from the beloved possessions of Ajans! She grants wishes like a Djinn, but oh, she takes and takes in return. Which is, I suppose, also like a Djinn. I wanted to weave more than webs—she obliged me. I was such delicate work, she said."

"What will he do with me when my tail is gone?"

The spider said nothing, clicking her needles together wretchedly. "Perhaps you should remember my poisoner," she ventured hesitantly.

"Where do you find this loyalty?" I cried. "I cannot remember your poisoner! My cage is fast, and the feathers he owns bind me; not so your little glass of days gone by, not so your needles! Do something, if you hate him so, unlock my cage, bite him, do not serve him pitifully, as though you can do nothing else!" I rattled the blackened bars in frustration, but Sleeve simply regarded me coolly, her threads waving.

"Do all large creatures think this way, as though their travails are the tragedies of the world, and the suffering of the small is nothing compared to their own? Certainly Kostya thinks so, now that he casts a long shadow. He does not mark me any longer—I am an eight-legged machine with no other purpose than to manufacture brightness in his sight. From where he towers, he cannot even see me. But he told you there are corners here, and where there are corners there are mice, and all mice live in awe of what he has accomplished, he who walks among men in such beautiful clothes. He does not need to watch me; they watch. They hear. A bell is a cage as sure as your own." She shook her head. "I am not so bright as you, but still I bleed and bear up under him, for her sake."

Abashed, I lay back on my cushions. The cage rocked and the rafter groaned under its weight. The night pooled black on the thin floor-boards. Sleeve's voice echoed again from the bell, thoughtful and rasping.

"The thread I use in your cloak is not from your feathers, you know. It is the reddest of red-golden silk, and I helped Xide to spin it out from the worms in

their boxes. And she told me—she always tells me—where the thread will end. Would you like to know?"

"Yes," I said weakly.

"'Little Sleeve,' she whispered—she is so considerate, not to hurt me with loudness, as so many others do—'you would not believe where this thread will wend! All the way through your little body, through to a cradle in the night, into swaddling clothes and a child's only comfort. But it will not end even there—it is a gift from sister to sister, and there is so much fire to come, so much fire, and light!'

"And so I think again you should remember my poisoner, and take heart."

There was no more from the bell, though I waited and waited and strained to hear the smallest thing. But there was nothing. The bell tower was hushed and still. In due time, the mouse-man returned to snatch another fistful of feathers from my tail. He sang and pranced in glee. I did not scream, but whimpered, and wept, and the circle beneath the cage grew. And so my days and nights went, with a spider at my ear and mice at my cage door. Once or twice I thought I saw the flash of gray fur or tiny black eyes behind the gaping eye holes of his mask.

I am very large, but a cloak is thick with layers, and when my tail was gone, and I naked and shamed, it was still not enough. Thus I had to wait, and so did he, until it grew back, and could be plucked again. Sleeve, being but a little seamstress, could only weave so fast, and between these two happenstances, the weaving of the cloak spanned more than two years. I felt myself growing dim and old with loss of blood and flight and sour, golden tears. Three times he plucked my tail, and in the meantime the bell tower became piled with shining things, with jars of silver and braziers of copper, with coins and endless jackets, all of yellow and each brighter still than the others, with bolts of cloth that seemed to glow, with fruit that sparkled in the firelight—and the remains of this I was allowed to eat when Kostya had finished: apples and pomegranates and plantains and slick, wet dates. Occasionally, true to his word, there were mice, snatched from the corners of the tower and dangled into my cage: Why should he weep over mice who had not eaten Yellow or Green, who had not been reared in the Dust, who did not live in his casing of silk?

Finally, when I had no strength left, so often had I been plucked and stripped, so often had my joy and my will gone floating up to the bell, Kostya came home from his evening sport shaking and giggling with anticipation. I could hardly lift my head without his ordering me to do so.

"Lantern, perk up! It is ready, I am sure it is! The brightest thing I have ever known! I shall be brighter even than you!"

I thumped my sparse red tufts feebly. A few sparks crackled against the bars.

"What a sullen brat you are," he admonished, adjusting his golden peacock mask. "Sleeve! Sleeve! Is not my cloak ready? Send it down! I have waited so long! You promised! If you do not present it immediately I shall run at quick speed all the way back to the Church-door!"

Out of the rim of the bell came a sheen of gold which grew and grew. Even I was stunned, dazzled by it: the cloak of feathers, finished beyond imagination, so long that it would flare out behind the wearer in a regal pool of feather-silk. It shone with gold and red and orange and white, each feather layered upon others, the eyelets almost too bright to look at. It had a little, stiff collar of my shortest feathers, which would cuff the face jauntily, and it glowed with my own light, my own colors, fringed and lovely, lovely beyond the dreams of the highest-born tailor. I could not imagine a Queen, an Emperor, a dandy who would not be made small and mean and dark in that cloak. It was like the very sun woven into the shape of shoulders.

Kostya squeaked in ecstasy. But as he examined it closely, he began to frown.

"It was brighter before," he groused.

Sleeve ran down the length of the hanging cloth, still wavering from the bell. "His feathers will only flame when they are attached—he is the fire, not they. But he is too big to wear as a shoulder brooch—no cloak has ever been made which could be its equal, Kostya, my friend." She clicked her needles and swallowed hard. "You are brighter even than *she,*" she spat finally.

At that, Kostya leapt into the air, dancing a jerky but joyful little step, clicking his emerald-booted heel against his emerald-stockinged calf. "Help me!" he giggled. "Help me put it on!"

He stepped into the cowl of the cloak, and Sleeve, with her needle legs and a great deal of struggle, heaved the shimmering thing over Kostya's squirming shoulders, ignoring his chirps of lust and the wringing of his gloved fingers. It

lay on him like a huge, fiery hand, and in the moment that Sleeve pulled the left side up onto his body and fastened the clasp of my own talon, clipped and carved, the man of mice began to scream.

He writhed in the cloak, but his mask kept his face impassive, the little slit of mouth neither moving nor twisting. Terrible and high the first voice came, and then hundreds, thousands, shrieking tinny voices, a chorus of mice in agony—and they began to pour out of the eyes of the mask, out of the mouth, out of the wig, chewing through the green stockings, the boots, rushing from the brocaded belly, tearing the yellow coat to filthy shreds. The mice poured out of their body, but as they ran, blind, desperate, they began to die, two by two, falling onto the floor-boards with small, wretched thumps, one by one. Sleeve ran among them, piercing them with her needles and crying in her own hoarse, thready way, terrified and triumphant. It took a long time for her to make sure they were dead, dead as dust.

When she was finished, she hooked the cage key from his polished belt onto one of her legs and dragged it to me. I am not so dexterous with my beak as a rule, but I certainly had the grace to let myself free of that thing which had kept me for years on end.

"I have been thinking," panted the spider, "that perhaps mice ought not to be indulged. Perhaps a Star does not really need a spider to look after her. Perhaps I have lived in a bell long enough."

"I do not understand," I said in wonder, stretching my wings from wall to wall.





"It took me two years to infuse every feather with my poison. I am only one spider, after all. It steamed with the stuff by the time I was done, though you could not see it. They breathed in my vapors, and in their panic—one can always depend upon the panic of mice—chewed through their clothes and the bottom layer of feathers, and swallowed all my poisons as eagerly as they have swallowed everything else. My poison is not bright, but it is quick."

Weeping and laughing together, Sleeve and I walked through the wreckage of mice. I crushed them underfoot, one by one, making little rings on the boards like ghastly cups. She sat on my shoulder, stroking my feathers as my breath heaved in grief and relief.



When we had finished, I let my sparking tufts light the cloak, and we watched it burn, the poison leaping bright and green in the flames. We watched it burn until it was clean, and then Sleeve asked me to break the bell.

"I cannot turn that lock," she said. "Surely you will do this thing for me."

I looked up into the disappearing rafters, so broken and high that the sky poured in like a bottle of black ink. I gave a few flaps of my wings to meet it, and though without my tail I was awkward, I managed to shiver it to bronze splinters with a blow of my beak.

"Thank you," Sleeve said, and began slowly to walk down the staircase, her satisfied needles clicking all the way down.

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

"OBVIOUSLY IT GREW BACK AGAIN," I SAID, eyeing his full, thick tail, glowing cheerfully in the dark. It lit the room like a hearth.

"Obviously," he said.

"But this place has hurt you so—why would you stay? And in that same cushioned cage? What a morbid beast you must be!"

He laughed quietly, so as not to wake the child. "At first I was afraid to leave, to go back into this strange city, with its empty streets and alien sounds. I cowered here. I kept eating mice. But finally I peeked out of the door, and saw the Parish overtaken by all these saints of Ajanabh, who stayed, and danced in the ruins. I know something about that—and so I went to dance, as well. In the Carnival of the Dawn I am the sun's best blaze, and in my flames the city sees each day born again. I am not a phoenix, but I do my best."

"You act as though you do it all by yourself!" The child sat up suddenly, long hair tumbling around her face, her arms crossed over her chest, glaring at the great Firebird.

"Well, I did, my dark-eyed darling, before you came along." Lantern looked up at me, his golden eyes bright with pride. "Children change everything, don't you know?"

The child, as I could see her clearly now, was extraordinarily beautiful. Her eyes were wide and clear and brown as good kindling, her hair braided loosely, long and soot black, her nose fine and flared, her chin cut sharply as a gem. I do not know very much about human children; she was certainly no woman

grown yet. But she was not a baby, either, and I saw corded muscles in her arms—I could certainly believe she danced. Winding up her right arm and one side of her chest, covered in minimal fashion by scraps of red cloth, were intricate tattoos, painstakingly pricked into her skin: the long, forked black outline of a dancing flame, painted all the way up to her neck and licking at her cheek.





"Still," I mumbled, "she cannot be your daughter. Those are not true flames; she is no true child of yours."

The girl narrowed her eyes at me, full of hate and disdain. "What do you know?" she hissed. "Who are the parents of plain, smelly smoke? He is my papa, as true as anything you have known in your life."

Lantern looked uncomfortable.

"Perhaps it is time," he said miserably. "Perhaps I have indulged you like a little mouse." The child looked stricken, her eyes filling with tears as easily as a child's will. "She came back, you see. After all that time, she came back to me…"

THE TALE OF THE CLOAK OF FEATHERS, CONTINUED

I HAD LEARNED TO DANCE IN THE CARNIVAL, and all my feathers were full again. The cloak was closed safely away, and I owed fealty to no one. It was almost as though none of it had happened, almost as though I had never seen the world through a cage. But I could not quite bear to take the cage down, to dash its bars in and tear up the blue cushions. I told myself that it reminded me of what happens when a thief is not careful—for did not all this begin in Ravhija's orchard, when I was so careless as to be caught with my mouth full of cherries? But I think in truth I was afraid of it, as though it were a living thing that had swallowed me up for all those years, and was still too dreadful to approach.

So it was that I was roosting in the ruins of the bell when she came.

I heard her coming up the stairs, a slow shuffle, a panting. When I think on it now I know it must have been so hard for her to climb those steep and winding steps. But climb she did, and stood before me, radiant and sorrowing and old, older than I had imagined, being but a silly bird who thought she would be just the same as when I knew her, just the same as before. This is the folly of all lovers, I suppose.

My goose was there, with silver hair and a little coat of goose feathers, and long gray skirts. My Aerie, whom I had loved so long ago, when she was a spellbound goose and I did not know what a cage was. My Aerie, so long lost. She did not need to speak; I knew her, even walking in that ridiculous woman's body—but what was not ridiculous about that moment? An old woman and a bird: as though a goose and a Firebird were not impossible

enough. She had passed beyond all possibility of touch, of nesting, of flight, of the sky and of me. I laughed, a hoarse, barking, anguished sound. We stood facing, each swallowing slowly how far we had come from the other.

In her arms she held a baby, wrapped in gray cloth and scraps of fur. I hardly saw it for seeing her.

"I'm sorry," she said finally. "I didn't ask to get old, or grow arms and legs. I would have been happy just to stay with you. But you wouldn't let me."

"My feather—"

"I know, my darling bird, I know. We could neither of us help it. Ours was a very sad story—perhaps the bedraggled opera down there will perform it one of these days. But being a woman is not so bad, and if I had stayed a goose, I would not have lived long enough to find you. Geese are brief creatures, and often silly."

She told me then all she had done since we parted, how she had known Stars and passed out of the world and in again, how she had delivered the Star's child and borne it out of the dark. I told her of the spider and the mice and the Star at the heart of the city. We would have let our adventures pool between us all night, but the child in her arms awoke and began to squall. She gave it her knuckle to suck and it quieted a bit. She looked up at me through her wispy hair, which was, in her old age, not unlike long, thin feathers.

"I brought her for you, all this way," she said.

"A child?"

"You wanted chicks so much, when I flew with you. You wanted them more than you wanted me. When this little thing first tugged at my hair, I knew where she would be safe, I knew you would look after her, I knew you would want her. She is not a chick; she has no feathers and no beak and she will never fly. But then, neither will I, any longer."

I looked at the swaddled girl, her big dark eyes blinking sleepily at me, her shock of black hair like burned grass. She was not very much like a Firebird, but my heart was always gentle, and when the tiny thing reached out with her chubby red hand to clutch my warm bronze beak and I heard her laugh, I remembered all my cousin's orange eggs, I remembered the ash-nest and the desert trees, and I knew that poor orphan for my own, my solace, my hatched egg, my girl.

"I would have come looking—" I began.

"You would never have found me."

"She is beautiful."

"I know."

Aerie, businesslike and brusque, sniffed a little, and began to root through the broken planks and bolts of silk and shining things the mice had left to find enough shards to make a cradle. While she searched, I sang quietly to the child, and she gurgled along with me, after a while.



It was nearly morning when the cradle was finished, a ramshackle but strangely pretty thing resting on two long, golden cello bows and rounded shards of bell, built of red wood and stone, bedded in the Weaver's cloth and hooded with the lid of a chest that had once held piles of coins which had caught the mice's magpie glance. She laid the child inside and went back to the cloth to cut a blanket.

"Wait!" I cried suddenly, and dashed up the rafters, making the whole tower creak and shake. I pulled out my cloak of feathers from the space in the wall where I had closed it away, unable to look at it, unable to remember without terrible pains in my tail. I flew down, the golden cloak trailing behind me like kite cloth. With this we swaddled our girl, with this we tucked her into her dreams, and that black-haired dear slept in my down, all those golden feathers gleaming around her face like sunbeams.

I missed the Carnival that morning. Aerie lay in my wings as she had once done, and we listened to the sounds of a sleeping daughter. I struggled with tears that I absolutely would not let fall on her slender shoulders.

"But you will not go for a while, will you?" I whispered thickly. "I could not bear it. This is such a lonely place. Given time I could learn to hold this child so dear, dear as flames. Dear as any duck has held her chicks. But not without

you. You must stay awhile yet, for me. We shall be a family, for a while. Just a little while."



Aerie turned to me and smiled dazzlingly, like a dozen noontime suns. "Of course I will stay with you, my only love, my own."

She did stay. For a little while.

It was summer when she asked me. I had carried her up to the topmost rafters of the tower and she sat there happily, kicking her feet in the air, looking out over near-empty Ajanabh, pointing like a little girl at the landmarks she knew: the Vareni with its colors blazing, the Opera Ghetto faintly singing in the distance, the square of the Cinnamon-Star, and little Agrafena dancing, tiny and dark against the light.

"Would you give me a feather?" Aerie said suddenly, squinting up at me, shading her faded eyes.

"Why? What could you ask me that I would not do in a moment?" "I want to be able to call you whenever I wish, when I need to."

"Just cry out; I shall be here. Do I not jump whenever the child cries?"

Aerie laughed. I did not like how dry and brittle her voice was, like crackling wood. "Even so."

I thought about it. The sun was so bright and so red, that merciless southern sun I had come to know well. "For no one else would I ever lose a single feather, but to you, I would give them all, and more: my burning heart, given over flaming into your hands."

I craned my long neck, and the sun was caught in its loop for a moment, its glare and mine blazing together. I pulled a single long feather from my tail, tipped in sparkling blood, and let it fall into her wrinkled hands.

And do you know? It didn't hurt at all.

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

"In the morning, she had disappeared as though she had never been, and I stood alone in my bell tower, with a hungry daughter to feed." The Firebird ruffled the girl's hair with his massive wing. "I called her Solace, for so she is, my solace for an empty nest, my solace for a lost goose."

Solace was crying, her little shoulders heaving horribly, her head bent low.

"I thought… I thought… I thought I was yours," she whispered.

"You are, little pumpkin-seed!"

"No, I thought… I was really yours. You came from a tree, but you're a bird. The Manticore comes out of fruit, and looks nothing like fruit. A dragon looks like a girl when it is young. I thought… I thought I was a Firebird. I thought I would sprout wings one day and fly with you, so close to the sun! I thought: Nothing in this world looks like its parents. I am no different."

She put her arms around the great neck of her papa, and wept bitterly.

"I am sorry, poor dear. I ought to have told you. But I loved you so well, and you were so happy. I could not bear to tell you otherwise. Do you know," he said to me over the shaking head of his daughter, "that when she could walk and jump she ran straight to my old cage and made it her bedroom? She loved the old thing, how it swayed and swung! I piled up more cushions for her, and the minute she was bouncing and laughing inside, it did not seem so dreadful after all."

"I am just an orphan," the child whispered to no one in particular.

"No, Solace, never that."

I watched the two of them, burrowed into each other, and casually patted back some of my smoke-hair that threatened to overflow its basket. They slowly recalled that they were not alone. Solace hopped out of the Firebird's tail and sat on the rim of the ivory cage, looking at me intently.

"You are a very good listener," she said shrewdly, kicking her legs back and forth. Her right leg was blazing with the same flame tattoos, all the way down to her toes. She wore a short little skirt of the same ragged red cloth as her shirt—a dancer's fluttering scarves. "I can't go nearly so long without asking questions when Papa gets on about the dragon-girl and old Sleeve. She comes to see me sometimes, you know. Says I'm just like her: feral, not properly socialized. I asked her what proper girls do once, and she said she didn't know, but she thought that dancing like I do was probably not on the list."

"Probably not," I allowed. "Among my people I'm considered a matron, though I'd wager I'm no older than you in years properly counted. I don't know what a proper Queen does, either, but I'm reasonably sure they don't go behind enemy lines and listen to stories, so I think we're about even in our wickedness." I smiled. Solace flinched a little at the wisps of flame between my teeth.

"I could tell you a story, if you like," the girl said, a deep blush rising in her cheeks—but she did not cast her eyes down. I didn't imagine Lantern had taught her how to do that.

The Firebird nudged her a little, pressing his warm head to her back. "There's time before dawn," he said, proud as any father of his precocious girl. "Tell the bad old devil a tale if you like."

She giggled, a sound that from another child might have been precious, but hers was genuine and dear. "Very well! I shall tell you how I learned to dance…"

THE FIRE-DANCER'S TALE

By the time I was old enough to dance, Ajanabh was well and truly dead. I was weary of the bell tower, but even in a city of artists, I was not brave enough—not quite yet—to go down into the streets without my papa to find out what it is that a girl ought to do. Even a dead city has ghosts, and I could hear them at night, howling and singing and dancing on this great red grave.

I only came out to watch Papa dance at the Carnival of the Dawn. He was so beautiful, with his tail waving high and low, fluttering like a rain of stars. I wanted to stand in his tail while he danced, stomping his big claws down on the courtyard, throwing his plumes back in the first light, flaring that tail like a lady's gown. I wanted to stand there and see all that fire moving around me, and listen to the sound of it—fire makes this great, roaring, snarling sound when it spins and leaps, did you know that? I hear it in my dreams.

One day when I was roasting a mouse and a few dates for breakfast, Sleeve clattered up the stairs as she will sometimes do, grumbling and grousing as she often does.

"Lantern, you are raising this child to be as wild as a kitten lost in the jungle! You must let her find other little girls and learn what it is that girls like, what they eat, what they do when they are happy, what they do when they are sad! Would you have her be like me? The other spiders think my webs are strange, even now."

"I don't like other little girls," I piped. "They are silly and taller than me and they have no flames at all." I chewed a mouse bone and Sleeve gestured in

righteous indignation.

"See? She's a wolf-girl."

"I'm a Firebird!" I insisted. I suppose I feel a bit ridiculous about that, now, but you let me believe it, Papa, so I cannot be blamed for having done just as you told me.

"Lantern, let me take her down into the city. If she is to live here, she must learn an art, or she will be shunned, and a shunned girl cries very much, and you will never hear the end. I shall take her to the calligrapher in the high shop, for that is the closest thing to a little girl I know—he has similar parts, at least—and we will find out what it is that is right and proper for a girl to do."

"I am *not* a girl." I frowned. Oh, Papa. You should have told me. I should not have made such a very big fool of myself otherwise. Poor Sleeve!

But true to her word we went first to the calligrapher in the high shop, with his hat of blue and buckles, and his ink-stained fingers, and his many podiums with beautiful books open to beautiful pages of writing, with pearl-handled magnifying glasses resting in their spines.

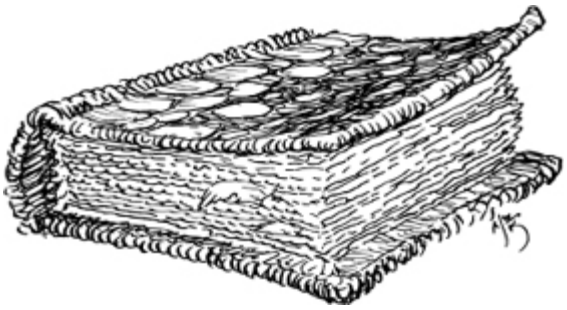
"What is it, Master Calligrapher, that little girls do in the way that spiders weave?" Sleeve asked primly.

The calligrapher coughed, for his room was very dusty, and there was dust even on his eyelashes, and said: "It is right and proper," he said, "for a girl to read as many books as there are bricks in this city, and then, when she is finished, to begin to write new ones which are made out of the old ones, as this city is made of those stones."

Sleeve beamed at me, pleased that we had discovered the answer in our first try. So it was that I went every day for a whole month to the calligrapher's shop and read his books, which had lovely pictures in gold leaf and letters like swans in flight. I liked the books very much, but it was so quiet in his shop, and all his shutters were closed, so that the vellum would not be damaged by the sun. It was terribly dark and the calligrapher squinted, his face close to his pages. He never talked to me at all. If I stay here much longer, I thought, I shall become as weak and thin as a book's page, and then one flick of my papa's tail will set me alight!

Very politely, as politely as I knew how, I asked if I couldn't take a few of the books with me—the very sturdy ones, mind you, with not so very many golden

pictures—and read them myself in the sunlight, or in the bell tower, or anywhere at all but that dark, dreary, dusty place. Besides, I knew to be wary of dust. My papa told me so. The calligrapher agreed, glad to me rid of me, I think, and I ran from his shop with three volumes clutched to my chest, my favorites of all his collection, the ones about lost girls and lost beasts and grotesques. And so I was sitting up against a mangrove tree reading about saints and centaurs when Sleeve came clattering up.



"What are you doing! You should be with your calligrapher!"

"It was dark, and he never spoke to me. Lantern speaks to me every day! How was I to concentrate on the books in all that silence?"

"But he was a man; he could have taught you all you needed to know about being a little girl!"

"But he is not a little girl," I pointed out, I thought very wisely. "What does he know? His books know more than he does, and I took some with me, so I think I shall be all right."

Sleeve threw up four of her legs in digust. "How am I to become acquainted with real and actual girls? There are not so many little ones left in Ajanabh, and those there are often think it is right and proper for girls to crush spiders."

So we went to the creatures with which Sleeve was acquainted. We came first to the ants, their little mandibles gleaming red and their hill a great mass of straw and stone.

"We think it is right and proper for a girl to enter into soldiery as soon as possible," they said in unison. "No need to shelter the child—winter is coming, lean and toothed."

"But there are no soldiers left in Ajanabh," I pointed out. One very large ant huffed angrily and said: "What nonsense! We are here!"

And so we went to the worms, who writhed and churned in the dry red soil. They turned over in their muck and smiled in their wormy way, white and fat and eyeless.

"We think it is right and proper for a girl to die. Girls must die if worms are to feast, and we think it is *extremely* proper for worms to feast."

I grimaced; Sleeve recoiled. “Thank you for your honesty,” I said, “but I think we shall have to disagree.” Their faceless smiles broadened. “For now,” I added.

And so we went to the spiders. “I did not want to do this,” Sleeve groused, “but you are dear to me.”

The spiders kept to their webs like acrobats determined not to touch the ground. I thought Sleeve’s needles must have made them nervous, but she put on a very brave face and asked her question. The spiders only laughed, high, tinny laughter like the shaking of marsh reeds.

“What do you know about anything?” they jeered. “Spiders don’t weave, they *eat*. They spin and hunt and catch and feed. You have always been the stupidest of us. Whoever heard of a spider weaving dresses? Associating with birds? What is wrong with you, Sleeve? You are the worst sort of maiden aunt for this child. *Girls* weave, you freakish, hideous thing! *Girls* make dresses. Girls squeal very loudly and leap about and clutch their smelling salts.”

Sleeve said nothing. Her body slumped, as though she had expected no more, and I could hear her sniffling against the dust. Well, I certainly leapt about then, and blew their webs into ruined threads. “What do *you* know?” I cried, kicking their silk in. “Sleeve makes the most beautiful things in the world while you sit about snickering into your ratty old webs! You know nothing! I have never made a dress in my life—she has made dozens! Does that make her a girl, and I a spider? And I have never smelled salt in all my days; what a stupid idea! Come, Sleeve, your cousins are the worst relations I can imagine.”

I cannot really say I was a well-behaved child. I cannot really say I have learned much since.

Her back was straight and her steps high as we left them, and as we walked I saw that her faceted eyes had a gleam in them. By gently pricking my toes she coaxed me down into the Clock-makers’ Square, with all its clicking and shadows and tap-tap-tapping of hands against numerals. She led me to a door all of locks, every sort of lock you can imagine: huge brass bolts to tiny, intricate silver keyholes no wider than a feather, wooden locks with gaping slots and golden locks with birds carved into their faces, locks so old and worn

that only rust was left, and locks in the shape of open, staring eyes blown from purest glass.

I put my hands against them and the door swung open. There was no one inside.

"Hello?" I called, and Sleeve echoed me.

There was movement in the rear of the workshop, a crash and a jangling. Two golden eyes blinked at me in a wreckage of plate metal and gears which had been her camouflage.

"I am not supposed to come out when company is present," the creature said uncertainly, all metal and whirling clock hands.

"But there is no one here to call us company and make us tea."

"Mother is out," the glittering woman said.



"You can answer our question just as well," cried Sleeve, delighted, introducing the woman as Hour, who had spider silk in her joints. "What is it that girls do in the way that spiders weave?"

Hour seemed to consider it, wringing her metal hands. "I do not know," she answered after a long pause.

"What do you suspect?" I encouraged.

The woman looked wretched, as wretched as a face made out of broken clocks and breastplates can look. "I suspect," she whirred tentatively, "that they live in castles. Beyond that it is hard to say."

"A bell tower is *like* a castle," I said. Sleeve rolled her eyes.

"I am sorry, but it is not," said the ticking woman. "It does not have a Prince inside or outside, and there is no portcullis or moat or chapel. Many castles have towers, but a tower is not a castle all by itself."

"I am sure I do not wish to live in a castle, then. It sounds vile," I answered. "And what in the world is a Prince?"

Hour brightened. "If you would like to know I can explain about primogeniture and patriarchal descent systems," she said eagerly.

"There are no castles handy," chirped Sleeve hurriedly, "so I think we shall have to seek elsewhere. Do not worry! At least you will not have to ask the squid. They are ghastly."

"I am sorry," said the machine, slumping at the shoulders. "I will try to have the right answer, if you will come back later."

I put my hand on the creature's shoulder. "It's all right; I don't know, either. But spiders are funny and determined things, and must be treated carefully."

"Yes," she said. "It is the same with clocks."

We left the strange little shop, and Sleeve seemed glad to be away. She took me next up to the high, windy peak of the highest tower in the city. "Is this a castle?" I asked.

"Certainly not," puffed the spider.

And that is how I met the Sirens, who were frightening as fire unchecked, but pretty enough to make me bashful. They nuzzled Sleeve in a very unbirdlike fashion, their women's legs pointing and skipping in joy.

"My old friends, you must help me! Tell me what it is that a girl does in the way that a spider weaves, so that Solace will not grow up to be the wrong sort of girl."

We like the wrong sorts of girls, they wrote. *They are usually the ones worth writing about.*

"Please." Sleeve sighed. "You needn't be a bunch of silly, flea-bitten birds for my benefit."

"I'm a Firebird, anyway," I grumbled under my breath.

We think, went their flowing feet, their dancing penmanship, *that girls ought to sing. They ought to sing, and dance while they're singing. But we are not girls, and so can be almost certain that we know nothing about the matter. But we let you try, so why not her?*

The sisters seized me with their wings—theirs were cool and dry, not like Papa's, but a wing is the right sort of thing, that I knew. Everything good in the world has feathers and wings and claws. They led me to the ink-wash and passed my feet through, and then began to whirl me between them. It was a mess of legs and wings and beaks, but it slowly became a dance. They lifted my feet with deftly turned ankles, moved my arms in time with their wings. We

danced together, the Sirens and I, but they never sang, never once, and I spun with them in silence, faster and faster.

When it was over, the four of us looked down at the paper floor, the expanse of swirling ink, trying to read the tale we had written there—something lovely, I hoped, with no castles at all and a great many birds—the tale our feet had dragged behind us in our swift, complicated dance.

There was a scribble, a scrawl, a jagged mess. The sisters had managed a few words here and there, but in their instruction they could not manage both the steps and the tale. There was nothing of note. They leapt up again and fluttered to a fresh corner.

You are hopeless at letters, they wrote, *that is very sad.*

"But the dancing!" I cried. "The dancing! I want to dance like that!"

Try the Dancing-Master, they suggested with a flourish. *We only know how to dance with each other, how to dance the letters. We suspect perhaps one ought only to dance with one's sisters.*

Sleeve sighed. Her poor needle legs were so tired of walking. But she was determined, more determined, certainly, than I, who after all had little interest in the fates of girls. We wound down from the Sirens and into the streets again, the winding, circular streets of my home. This time she led me down, down the tight, thin alleys and down streets wider than Lantern's wings, but we went up no hills, turning and twisting to remain pointed downward, until we came to a little grating in a high wall, the side, I thought, of the opera house, which even the opera singers barely used anymore, since they now had the whole city happy to stand in for any courts of intrigue or enchanted pastorals they could dream of. It was nearly dark by the time we found it.

The grate was small, and it led into a darkness without depth, but I was little then: I could wriggle through the bars, and darkness was darkness, and could not hurt me—Lantern taught me that, blazing as he did against the fears of any crawling shadow.

"Come with me!" I said to my spider, who hovered around the copper bars, and looked suspiciously into the murk.

"No," said Sleeve slowly, shaking her head. "This is where the Dancing-Master lives. There is another entrance by Simeon's knee, but that is farther. I thought this one best, and I brought you, but I know very well how to dance."

I shrugged. I was not very concerned. I walked into the dark with a straight back. The mud was warm on my feet, and as I descended the air became cooler and cooler, and the ceiling higher and higher, until I knew I was nowhere near the opera house any longer, and even if I put my arms straight overhead, there was nothing above me but dark air, swirling and thick.

At last, the mud slackened, and a real path hardened beneath me, lit by a sudden bank of torches which burned low and sullen on the walls. Wider and wider the path grew, until it opened into a vast vault, whose stone walls vanished into bronze domes, arching up and up and up, spangled with painted dolphins with intricate eyes and faded white stars near the peaks of the many domes. The sides were scored with ancient watermarks, ascending the walls like the rings of a tree.

At my feet was a maze. It was low and small and intricate, but no challenge at all, really, for you could jump over any of the walls as easy as you please. The tallest one came up to my waist. They were made of rock and bone, the little walls, Ajanabh's familiar red rock with chicken bones and duck bones and common gull bones pressed into the sharp corners. It angled off into the distance, over the entire floor of the vault, polished bones glinting in the firelight.

"These used to be cisterns," came a voice like footsteps echoing in a marble hall, "when Ajans cared to worry about such things as sieges. There was once enough water here to keep the city drinking tea well into any war, slurping at their scarlet cups while the army outside ate itself into defeat. You used to be able to put your ear to the street and hear the gentle sloshing of the dark water —it was a comforting sound, for so many people. Now it is empty, it is drunk all up, and no one thinks about sieges anymore."

I looked but could see no one. I began to step over the first wall of the maze —and almost stepped on them.

At the entrance to the maze was a pair of shoes. They were twisted out of the roots of cassia trees, curling wildly at the toe and the heel, the red roots snarling and looping like an embroidered hem. The scent of them was rich and dark and sweet: expensive cinnamon floating in a cup of black tea.

"Don't be afraid," came the voice again. "I am for wearing—no one will punish you."



I raised my foot to slip it inside, and stopped. "I am supposed to learn to dance. And find out what girls are meant to do, the way a spider is meant to weave."

"Ah, but not all spiders weave, so your question is a bit foolish on the face of it, don't you think?"

I blushed. "Sleeve wanted to know. It doesn't make any difference to me," I mumbled.

"As for dancing, there is nothing easier. Put your feet in my care. I am not called the Dancing-Master for nothing."

"*You* are the Dancing-Master?"

"Of course. What else could teach so well as I? But I do not teach alone: This maze is laid out such that should you step through the correct path, by its end you will have learned the most extraordinary dance, such that any coronation would be proud to see at the height of its feast, such that any holy dervish would weep and call you his devotion."

"I think this is very strange—"

"All things are strange which are worth knowing. Come, I have asked a third time. Step into me and while you walk the maze I shall tell you how a pair of empty shoes came to be at the bottom of a cistern."

I lowered my foot and sank into the shoes, which were just my size, and felt like sudden fists seizing my feet.

THE TALE OF THE CINNAMON SHOES

ATTEND TO ME, GIRL. I AM YOUR METRONOME. Keep to my voice; I will keep your rhythm true.

I see you go bare-shod. This is most likely extremely sensible. Shoes are no end of trouble for girls, that tribe you seek in the dark. How many have danced to death in slippers of silk and glass and fur and wood? Too many to count—the graveyards, they are so full these days. You are very wise to let your soles become grubby with mud, to let them grow their own slippers of moss and clay and calluses. This is far preferable to shoes which may become wicked at any moment.

I seem to remember being a tree. A cinnamon tree drank rain until someone pulled it out of the earth by the hair and made a very nice armoire, two high-backed chairs with seats of stiff linen, a round table at which generations of children learned their letters, a post for witch-burning, an extremely expensive book with cinnamon boards and cinnamon paper written upon with cinnamon ink—a Psalter, I think—a carriage wheel, and one pair of shoes.

I remember also a woman's hands, and how she sipped her tea of white leaves, violets, and a single red leaf as she pulled the roots into the complicated knot-work you see now. Her shop was pleasant and dusty and I had very high company to converse with, any number of riding boots and dancing heels, their white pelts stitched with fine blue thread. But they were truculent beasts,

and would not speak to the ragged cinnamon shoes. I was not sorry to leave them when I was packed away and sent to the city on the red plain.

In Ajanabh I was the superior shoe. No riding boot could compare to a shoe of cinnamon, the sacred stuff of the city. I dreamt of sweet, slim feet whirling and kicking at festivals of spice and starlight; I dreamt of being kept on a high podium with a rose-colored cushion, my arches cupped by yielding silk. Instead, I was taken to a tomb.

A tomb is like a cistern, you know. It is full of flesh as a cistern is full of water, and the ceilings drip. There are devotional paintings of the virtuous dead etched into the stone with inks that cost more than water or corpses, and voices echo, and the shadows lick the corners clean, and no one would go inside were they not compelled. I suppose he was compelled, the priest who bought me dear and carried me to his daughter's bier like anointing oil.

She had been a good girl when she was alive, he assured everyone who would listen. But what father has ever said otherwise? She was pious; she was kind to the poor. Every morning she would wash herself in freezing water—such an expense, such an extravagance in Ajanabh where they say the glass bubbles in the pane in summertime! And when her skin ached with the cold, she would dust red her arms, her chest, her face, her hair, with cinnamon ground finer than the most treasured dreams of salt. They were a holy family, and had to set an example, her father said. She went to the finest seminary in the city and learned there how to distill both liquor and ink from cinnamon and the light of the Stars—and more important, she learned that each has its proper time and use, and used them as they were meant. No one was more moderate in her dress or her person, her father said. No one lived who was more serious or more studious. No one behaved so much and so often precisely as it is proper for a girl to behave.

And when the fields died, her father said, she was disconsolate, as it is necessary for the child of the Priest of Red Spices to be. She bathed in their icy fountain until her teeth chattered and her lips went blue and swollen. She prayed and studied her own little cassia-cuttings, her own window garden that it is only correct for a priest's daughter to keep, but they were wild and thick with needles and dusty with sweetness. And finally, she stopped lashing her

skin with bitter water, and left her garden to walk out among the fields, where she buried herself in the ailing earth.

She left her eyes and her mouth open to the air, but the rest she covered up in red loam like a child pulling up her favorite blanket over her chest. And there—devout girl!—she kept up her prayers, encouraging the earth to learn from her hot blood, her beating heart, her ascendant soul. And so the earth took these things, but, like a man of poor breeding, learned nothing. Whatever withered the roots of the basil and the paprika, the cardamom and the garlic greens, withered her in the soil, and once planted, his beloved daughter never rose again.



They unearthed her form, cold as it had been on any of her sacrosanct mornings in the frozen fountain, and carried it to the family tomb. There it was laid out on this very bier of fragrant cedar, a spray of cassia flowers clutched in her virginal hands, a dress of rarest bark-cloth arranged in precise folds on her body. He wept at her side every day, he said, his tears her icy fountain.

Who knows with what grief's whispering he decided that I would wake her? It is best not to ask, for the tribe of dead girls is infinitely more inscrutable than that of those living, and who knows what their shades insinuate when midnight has long closed up its windows? He believed it, believed in the holiness of the red spices, and perhaps that was enough. And so the cinnamon shoes were matched to the cinnamon girl, and slipped onto her hard, gray feet. The Priest of Red Spices waited there at her side with held breath, his face reddening with hope and need.


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I will not say she woke and threw her hard, gray arms about her papa. I will not say he sang with joy and they danced a filial waltz around the tomb. But after I had clutched her ankles for a fortnight and more, and he had fallen asleep on an empty bier, as fathers will sometimes do when they are waiting for their daughters to be born, a trickle of red mud came dripping out of her nose, and tears of red mud came weeping from her eyes, and a slow stream of red mud came oozing from her mouth. She rolled up from her slab and began to cough quietly, as a polite girl will cough, all the red earth of the Ajan fields heaving from her, wet and dead, bright and thick.

Her father did not wake. Fathers sleep heavily. The pious daughter cleaned her mouth and stood shakily, balancing in me, in her cinnamon shoes, and I could feel her weight, so little, so light, having been dead so long. I felt her sadness and her fear, her urgency, her shivering soles, her need to see the sun again. These are the secret things a shoe knows, for we carry a creature within us, and divine all its self.

"Papa," whispered the dead daughter. "Wake up. It is time to take me home." She kissed his cheek with dry lips.

The Priest of Red Spices opened his eyes and saw his girl, his devotion, his cinnamon darling. Her long hair was wet and knotted with mud and anointing oil and clotted spice, but he kissed her anyway and held her close. She let him touch her, stiff and uncertain, and allowed softly that she would certainly like to be shown at services, and hold a red candle, and be called a miracle. What else should a pious girl want?

But she was not at services when they were held. She was at the Duke's empty Palace, dancing through the abandoned rooms with their ruined tapestries of tigers and terns, their splintered walls and broken perfume bottles. Since she had died they had become a place for endless balls, endless revels, endless frenzied festivals by the light of candelabras dented and

tarnished. The young and careless were there, lined up in the dancing line like shabby dolls. Ajanabh was only lately dead; the wake still raged on.

The priest's daughter had only followed the light. Even the dullest creature knows to follow the light, and in her dull, gray state it was all she could manage: go toward the warmth, go toward the fire. I, too, itched to be used well, to be warm. I forced her feet only a little toward that blazing, raucous place. And there we danced, and there we spun, and there we felt the flames on us, hot and golden.

Thus I danced after all, with her slim feet tight in me, at festivals of cinnamon and starlight. I danced every dance you can imagine—and I danced them all twice. How many arms around her waist, how many polished shoes to meet me, how many floors once shining and checkered, now shattered and filthy with summer dust, did we press beneath us? Too many to count, my friend, too many to count. And as we danced, as each night ran on into the next in the Duke's abandoned estate, with all the topiary scorched black and all the roofs turned homes for pigeons and starlings, as we danced her arms became less hard and gray, her blood became less still and black, her cheeks became less sunken and cold. Her hair flew out behind her like a black wind, and her cheeks went redder than the candles, and her eyes became sharp and wild, red as cinnamon shoes. Her skin was less pink than scarlet, her blood so high I thought it might leap out of her. Her heart was nothing but a long, whirling scream.

Her father was delighted, and saw only her high color and her smiles. He did not see her teeth, he did not see how tight she clenched that red candle, how fast she ran when services were done. And the more she danced like that, the less I liked her. I wished to dance, of course; this is the best a shoe can wish for. But I wished to dance courtly dances, at weddings and harvest-time, complicated reels and waltzes as precise as clockwork. This dance took no skill; it was just a constant tempest, a sirocco that went on and on. I was tired.

And so I contrived, as she ran from the estate gardens with their blackened hedge-swans and hedge-giraffes, to slip from her feet and lie in the grass, happy and silent and unmoving. I would like to report that she fell down dead the minute I let her arch fly free, but she did not. I saw her black hair whipping

the wind as she bolted home, over the gardens and through the alleys, back to that damned red candle once more.

THE FIRE-DANCER'S TALE, CONTINUED

"I AM VERY BEAUTIFUL," THE SHOES SAID, preening like scarlet parakeets, "and was quickly picked up by a girl with better taste in dances. She had such green ribbons in her hair! I stayed in the estate for years, until there was no tallow left at all for the candles, and the violin strings snapped and curled, and the marble squares could take no more stomping feet. I was passed from dancer to dancer, and in this way I learned all that a shoe need know. Finally, a girl took me home, and though I was not at all sure how I felt about that, I did not try to force her feet back, but let her take me where she would. Shame of shames! Her mother took one look at the snarling roots I bear so well, snatched me up like a fish which has gone sour and is fit only for cats, marched out into the street, and tossed me through the cistern grating. I splashed, I floated, and, after a time, sank to the bottom, where I might have stayed, drowned as a dog, if not for the slovenly martial habits of Ajans."

I was panting and my hair clung to my ears with sweat by then, so quick and fast had I been forced to leap and turn and step, with the tiny, heel-to-hip kicks the narrow corridors demanded, the elongated, elegant, sliding motions of the long straightaways, with the pirouettes, with the catlike tiptoes. The voice of the shoes kept perfect time, and my body hummed to the dance, hummed with the knowing of it, hummed with the learning of it, as sometimes it had hummed with the books on my lap in the calligrapher's shop.

"Why the maze, though?" I gasped, executing a daring midair turn and landing hard on my heel.

The shoes did not answer for the smallest of moments. “I did not build it. I assume the Weaver made it, as she makes everything else here, and for her own reasons. It was here when I floated to the bottom of the black reservoir, and I discovered its use quickly enough.”



Finally, with three full spins and a flourish of my arms, I completed the maze. The shoes clacked their heels against the floor in applause, which is very disconcerting, having your feet move without your say-so. I doubled over, catching my breath.

“Thank you,” I wheezed.

“It is my pleasure,” demurred the Dancing-Master.

I could feel the sides of the root-shoes squeezing my feet, trying to hold on. “It is time for me to go now,” I said uncertainly.

“There is no need to leave me down here in the dark. Think how well we could dance together, in the candelabra halos! Think how beautiful all men would think you, in your cinnamon shoes, with your long legs dancing like a Gaselli!”

The shoes were strangling now, trying to hold on to me, trying to keep me fast inside them. “I… I think I should like to feel my own feet on the cobblestones, if it’s all the same.”

“It is not the same,” cried the Dancing-Master, squeezing tighter, like a snake around a mongoose. “I am tired of lying empty in the dark, waiting for girls to come and fill me up for a moment, only to run away when they are finished! I like you as well as I have liked anyone since the dead girl, and I want to dance again, in the Duke’s Palace, in the Duke’s garden, with perfume in the air!”

I scraped at the shoes, trying to get them off, tears of pain springing to my eyes. “Please! I don’t want to dance at the Duke’s Palace!”

“But I know, pretty little bird’s daughter! I know what it is right and proper for girls to do! I can answer your question!” The shoes ground tighter against my bones. “Girls are meant to dance, and spin until their skirts flare like petals, and look more beautiful than ruby-rimmed roses at balls which never end; they are meant to live for the revels; they are meant to bat their eyelashes and whirl in the arms of handsome men!” Tighter still the cinnamon shoes pinched and pulled. “They are meant to drink bubbling wine and laugh like finches

singing and dash into the shadows to be kissed! They are meant to blush and curtsey! They are meant to swoon! But they are meant to dance, most of all; they are meant to dance, dead or alive, cold or hot; they are meant to dance until their bones crack! They are meant to care only for the dance, only for the whirl of shining gowns and the sashes on young men's chests. They are meant to spin in men's arms for all their days, until their heel bones strike sparks on the dance floor!"

The voice of the Dancing-Master spiraled higher and higher, more and more shrill. I was weeping as the shoes wrenched, crushed my feet into the red roots, and my fingers scrabbled against them uselessly. I drew a hitching breath, my chest searing and tight, and leapt up into the air, just as the maze had taught me, a high, strong leap, and came down as hard as I could on the flats of my feet. The landing shivered my calf bones and I bit my cheek in a sharp-edged wince, but the careening voice ceased abruptly, like a door slamming shut.

The shoes were broken into pieces on the stone floor of the cistern, lying around me in sweet-smelling cinnamon shards.

"No," I said simply, and turned back to the long tunnel, back up to the air and the light.

When I emerged from the grate, it was nearly light. Sleeve was there, snoring lightly, as spiders will snore. It takes a long time to learn to hear a spider's snore, but by then my ears were keen as an owl's, and I heard her little wheezing, in and out, in and out. She woke with a shudder when I stroked her back, and looked up at me with her glittering black eyes.

"And how did we do this time? Same as the rest?"

"More or less." I shrugged.

"Well, come on with you, then. It's nearly time for Lantern to dance."

As the sun blinked sleepily over the Sirens' tower, Lantern stood in the courtyard with the gurgling fountain, amid the shouting and singing of the Carnival, and danced. His flaming tail tossed scarlet and yellow up into the air and down again like a fan, each frond of peacock-bright feathers wavering as if each one was a separate dancer. His huge feathered feet lifted up and stomped

down in a quick rhythm, one I had always loved. A dozen violins and trumpets and flutes played his music, and he turned his face to the new sun, his bronze beak catching the first light, sending it into the fountain in a shower of gold. I wanted, as I have always wanted, to see the world from within his tail, and that morning of all mornings, I stepped shyly up to my dazzling, burning father as he hopped up onto one claw and spun to the delighted gasps of the musicians.

"Papa," I said, and I wish my voice had not wavered; I wish my cheeks had not been so red and hot! "Let me dance with you."

He smiled, as only a bird the size of a house can smile, and I stepped into his tail.

The world through flaming feathers is washed in gold, scrubbed to gleaming by fire, and the sound of it roars ocean-fierce. I moved my feet as though the maze were still red and wide beneath me, I moved my arms like wings, and I danced in my papa's tail like a Firebird.

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

SOLACE GRINNED, HER FACE BRIGHTER EVEN than her father's. "*I* shall not dance until my bones crack," she said. "I shall dance every morning until my heart catches on the sun, and I fill up with gold like a crystal cup! And I shall never wear a proper dress, no matter how many Sleeve shows me, all a-spangle with green and silver!" Lantern nuzzled his huge head under her arm and she kissed his burnished plumage. "Of course, my hair burned up completely that first time! It has grown back just like Papa's tail, and I have had to learn since how to dance without catching fire. It is not too difficult, once you get the trick of it." She pulled hard on one of his feathers and the great bird squawked like a common duck. "But you should have told me, you rotten old seagull. What a trial I have been for my poor spider."

"Yes," Lantern said simply, and turned to me as though I had only just arrived. "That is all we have to tell," said the Firebird. "You may go or stay as you like, now. But the sun will be up soon, and we are for the Carnival."

I pursed my smoke-lips. "I am not sure what Simeon meant me to know of you," I confessed.

"Perhaps only that there is a Star in Ajanabh, and beside her, spiders and birds and girls which do not wish to be burned."

Solace hopped down lightly from the scorched cage and extended her hand.

"Do you want to go to the Carnival?" she asked, her tattoos gleaming up at me as fiercely as her eyes.

"Yes," I said, and slipped my black fingers into hers.

In the Garden

THE AFTERNOON WAS LATE AND GRAY ON THE SNOW. IT HAD BEGUN TO melt, and ice flowed everywhere in silent little rivers. The lake in which the girl had bathed —so long ago now!—had frozen silver and smoky. The sun wore a veil that day, and it shone only fitfully through the thick, gauzy clouds. The Gate glittered with hard little knots of ice, and the boy, who had never seen such cold in his life, ran his fingers over them in wonder.

"You must go now," the girl said. "Do not think you ought to linger here."

"I don't," he said, and shut his eyes while he fingered the ice. It melted to water against his skin. "What," he added thoughtfully, as casually as he could manage, "happened to the Papess, do you think?"

The girl furrowed her brow. She, too, touched the ice, and shook her head as her fingers stuck to the hard little globes that clung to the iron. "I do not know," she said, as though he had asked her what the inside of her eyelids looked like. "If there is something more about her written on my skin, you must read it, not I. I did not create her; I cannot arrange her footsteps through the world like a basket of flowers."

"What do you think, though?"

"I do not know, I told you. And it is time for you to run back to the courtyards, where your sister will be saying very serious vows, and eating, and dancing."

The boy smiled broadly, like the moon emerging from the horizon. "You are absolutely right!" he cried, and seized her hand in his.

"What are you doing? Let me go!"



"No," said the boy firmly. "You are a child of the Palace, and that gives you the right to dance at the wedding of Dinarzad, just like the others. In fact," he added with a crooked grin, "as a child of the Palace, you really haven't much choice in the matter."



He led her to the frozen lake, with its icy cattails waving still and shattering against each other from time to time. The ferns were white and shivering, and long naked branches bowed black and deep. From behind a rock crowned with bright mosses he drew a little bundle, just where she had said it would be, and presented it to the girl with all the pride of a cat who has managed, at long last, to catch a blackbird in flight, and brought it back to its mistress. The girl looked blankly at it, and he opened it for her, drawing the strings slowly open.

Inside was a dress. It was red, like her cloak, and overlaid with the most delicate mesh of gold, knotted into elaborate roses and birds soaring past ripe fields. The netting made a little train, and there was a belt of tiger's-eyes and golden chains, and a necklace of garnets, and lastly, a golden circlet which held up a soft scarlet veil.



"I told you not to," she said gently, but he saw her lip shaking.

"No one will know," the boy whispered, his voice as full of coaxing as a mother's who wishes her child to eat. "The veil will keep you hidden, and I shall brush your hair clean of leaves and snow. No one will know, and you can eat at the table, and stand by my side all the night long, and dance, like Solace, like a Firebird."

The girl was weeping, her shoulders quivering as she tried valiantly not to.

And so the boy helped her arrange the netting of the dress. He fastened her belt of tiger's eyes. He laid the necklace of garnets around her neck. He brushed her hair with his own fingers until it was soft and gleaming, and he braided it as best he could manage. He fixed the circlet on her brow, and let the veil fall over her face. He stood back and looked at her, blood-bright against the snow, the gold already catching new snowflakes like threads of silk.

"It was hers, you know," he said, "when she was our age. She let me have it. She is…" The boy swallowed. "Not quite so awful as I thought, my sister." He

squared his shoulders and shook his snow-dappled hair back. “But I was younger then, and much more foolish.”

He took her hand, which was terribly cold in his, and thinner than bones, but he smoothed her hair, just a little, before he remembered that it was not terribly polite, and withdrew his hand quickly. The boy and the girl walked together across the snowy orchards, toward the chestnut chapel, where firelight was already leaping toward the sky.



No one knew. He showed her the table, with its roasted birds and roasted beasts, with its wine and its steaming stews and its chocolates, with its slices of rough, red hippopotamus meat and its shaved camel-hump, wet and glistening. He showed her the crocodile, its sawtooth jaws propped open with silver bolts, and stuffed with sugared pears. He showed her the rhinoceros horn dripping with honey and salt. She laughed shyly, and ate as much as she pleased, and no one took any notice of her at all in all the milling children with their colored plumage.

The girl watched Dinarzad very curiously while she was wed, and she saw the trembling of her, and heard the breathlessness of her. The boy watched, too, but he tried not to see these things, for he did not wish to shame his sister by weeping.

And in the light of a hundred torches, under a sky full of hard, cold stars like ice on an iron gate, they danced. She was uncertain at first, but he showed her easy steps, and led her into the center of the throng, where the laughter and the voices and golden, whirling bodies were thickest, and the boy danced with the demon girl in the sight of all his relations, turning her faster and faster, until Dinarzad’s dress was a red-gold blur. He could see the tears fall from her chin beneath the veil, and his hands were wet with them. The boy’s sisters and cousins and matronly old aunts spun by and laughed as they spun, their voices thick with wine.

In the midst of the dance, the Sultan gestured from his holiday throne of ivory and plum-branches dipped in bronze. The boy looked nervously to his veiled friend, but could not refuse. He walked slowly to his father's seat with her frightened hand clutched in his. Over the Sultan's black beard he looked at them, his eyes reflecting the firelight like a Djinn's.

"What a beautiful little friend you have found, my son. She is quite striking, just as red as a demon."

"Y… yes, Father."

"Is she one of mine? It is so hard to tell, these days!"

"N… no, Father. She is visiting the court for the wedding, like so many others."

"Then, welcome, child! Be sure to speak well of us when you return to your foreign court. Tell them how good my son has been to you. Tell them my daughter welcomed you at her wedding. Tell them," his voice faltered slightly, but so slightly no one would have thought it was anything but the good, sweet wine, "tell them we were kind to you."

"I am sure she will, Father."

The Sultan leaned in to the two tremulous children, his long, curled hair wafting its scent of cedar and frankincense into their eyes. "And," he whispered, "look after my son, young lady. A boy can get his head turned quite around on an evening such as this."

The girl nodded, her voice long having fled her throat. The Sultan nodded their dismissal, and the boy led his scarlet friend onto the dance floor again, but the girl could not go on. Her weeping and her shaking was too great, and the boy took her away from the crowds, away from the chestnut canopies, and into the snow again, where she thrust her hands down into it, watching it melt under her heat. She looked up at the boy and he lifted her veil gingerly. Her face was streaked with tears, her eyelids shining like ink.

"If I weep long enough," she whispered, "do you think the ink might wash away, like a painting left in the rain? Do you think I could walk among those fiery people every day, among your drunken aunts, and your cousins, do you think I could sit beside your father and be called beautiful without my veil?"

"No," he answered gently, "I do not think that."

She laughed shortly and wiped her nose. "Neither do I."

He drew her cloak close around her and dried her tears with the corner of his sleeve. The porphyry bracelet knocked lightly against her cheek. She looked up at him with a stare full of red-rimmed urgency, and closed her eyes.

"Please," she whispered. "Please."

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

THE FIREBIRD AND HIS DAUGHTER AND I WALKED through an empty city. I saw those places the night's tales had laid out in my heart: the Dressmaker's Parish, the opera house, the Clock-makers' Square and the little house with so many locks, the church which was not a church, the churning river in more colors than I could count if I had a ledger and a thousand years. I thought I could see the Sirens' tower, impossibly high, off on the east end of the clustered red edifices.

We walked a wide and well-kept street, which skewed and counter-skewed as everything else in Ajanabh does, but this one, it seemed, less than usual. In fact, as we went, it widened, until we passed through an ample court peopled with a hundred silent statues, each face frozen and perfect in red stone, fluttering slate fans and clutching snuffboxes of agate and marble and malachite. It was the same one Agrafena had led me through, and once again I was chilled. But the Firebird did not seem to even notice them, and walked around the menagerie as Solace and I, being more graceful of foot, walked through, marveling at the sad, exact faces, each its own, with flared noses and slender ones, high brows and glowering, lips full and meager. We touched their cheeks, and the stone was full of little flecks of quartz that flickered in the dim predawn light. They were hard and warm and unyielding.

"They look like wives," I said, laughing, and Solace looked at me as though I were well and truly mad.



I would have left that grove of folk and thought no more of it than I had the first time, a wonder in a nest of wonders, if I had not heard her scrabbling in the corner of the square, mumbling frantically, a chisel in each hand.

She was probably beautiful, when she was young. Her hair was long and stringy and white, showered with stone dust, her worn face lined like a discarded map when no one is any longer interested in the treasure it promises. She had a snaggle-edged shawl knotted over her head, and her rags were brown and stiff and filthy. She was missing a tooth, and her feet were bare on the road.

"I suppose we ought to be glad she never grew up!" the old woman barked. I think her voice was fine once, but it sounded now like a harp with a broken spine.

"I'm sorry, old mother, I do not know what you mean," I answered her, keeping my distance.

"He told me once, when there was a shipment of brandy in and it was very, very late. That's when he liked to talk, you know, by the big fireplace, under that stupid, ugly old head. He told me where his wife went, and I suppose we ought to be glad she never grew up, or it would have gone badly for the butcher's boy when she turned up all green and fire-breathed!"

Solace covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes wide. The old woman trundled over and chiseled a bit of a spindle-waisted statue's eyebrow. "I made these for her, all of them. Over the years, you know. I didn't," her voice thickened like cream, "I didn't want her to be lonely, you see. I couldn't bear for her to be lonely. I couldn't bear for her to be like me. She's here somewhere, in the crowd, where she always liked to be. She's here somewhere… but I forgot." The crone's blue eyes, filmed and rheumy, were full of tears as she looked around her. "I just forgot," she whispered.

Solace dashed off without a word and I was left with the madwoman, as she scratched at her scalp, her eyes lost and dark. "Where is my Basilisk," she hissed at me. "Where is my baby rock-foot? Why didn't he come back for me?

Why doesn't he look at me the way he looked at her?" She stumbled a little on her thick feet and I caught her, though she choked and sputtered in my smoke. She righted herself and set to the sandstone bustle of another figure. "Where are you, you old lizard?" she choked. "Why don't you come back?"

While she worked, I told myself not to touch her, that she would not understand. But all the same I saw my dark hand, my blazing fingernails, reach out to her doddering head. I stroked her hair, and cupped her head in my hand. Perhaps she was just mad enough not to care, but she rested her head against my palm and closed her eyes, tears seeping out over the deep creases.

"I'm sorry, Orfea," I whispered.

Suddenly, Solace hooted and laughed from far off in the menagerie, and I took the old Duchess's hand and followed the noise as one follows the sound of a pheasant in the brush. We found her standing next to a tall sandstone figure, red of cheek and ankle, long-haired and high-browed, her fur-lined dress whipping sharply around her as she turned to stare, hurt and puzzled, at something on the ground.

Orfea reached out her rag-bandaged hands to the statue's face. "Good girl," she said with a sigh, "good girl, you found her, my darling, my old friend." She nestled herself into the crook-armed embrace of the red stone, her withered cheek against its rough, stiff face. "Do you think they can hear her singing?" she said. "The others, do you think they can hear her, in their stony ears?"

"Of course," said Solace kindly, stroking the old woman's hair just as I had done. "I can hear her now. She is so beautiful, when she sings up the sun."

The child drew me away then, and we left the two women there, stone and flesh. As we turned our backs, I could hear Orfea singing with her broken voice, and my throat closed on fiery tears that burned to fall.

And as we passed the last statue, the farthest out, a sandstone child in her mother's dress, tripping over the hem, I saw it, clutched in a red, rough hand, what was meant to be a snuffbox but which was not, just like the church which was not a church: a box of carnelian, no bigger than my own hand. I pried it out of the coarse-fingered child, and it was not heavy, not nearly heavy enough.

"What is this?" I said urgently. I grabbed Solace's arm and showed her the box.

“How should I know? Just some junk the Duchess used for her little zoo. She uses everything; you must have seen just as well as I.” Solace rubbed her arm, a pale pink hand-shaped scald rising where I had touched her—I had not been careful. I pled her forgiveness. “Surely there are many boxes in all these dead hands. How can you know this one is special?” she grumbled, cradling her arm.

But I knew. I looked at its polished surface, its design of curling, corkscrewing, arching grasses worked into the lid, its tiny claw feet, its minute, gold-speckled latch.

“Well? Open it!” said Solace.

“Should I? Kohinoor said it belonged to her. Perhaps it is not right that I should open it.”

“Then I will open it! Come, you cannot resist it—don’t you want to know what’s inside? They never told you anything a Queen should know. What do you owe them?”

I looked sharply at the young girl with her gleaming black tattoos and bare belly. “I thought you were sleeping,” I said suspiciously.

The girl grinned sidelong, her hair hanging down into her wolf-keen face. “Open it,” she coaxed.

And so help me, I did. I slid the flame of one thin fingernail into the lock and turned it, listening to the click of the carnelian tumblers. The lid popped up slightly, and I lifted it gingerly. Lantern peered over from behind a statue of a young man slaughtering a stag, and Solace stood on her toes to see inside.

I let the casket fall open, and lying within, no bigger than a finger, was a woman made all of grass, her hair a mass of curled seeds, her form woven reeds braided together, one over the other. Her meadow-eyes were serenely shut, her tiny blade-hands folded over a dress of straw and light. No part of her did not shine with this light, silver and sere, and it pooled in the box as though I were holding a red candle in my hand. The three of us stood staring at her, the little green woman in the box.

“Is she going to wake up?” Solace asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know why Kohinoor could possibly want her,” I answered.

With infinite care, I put my finger into the box and stroked the side of the grass-woman’s face with my smoke. She turned to it like a child suckling its

mother and breathed the black of my skin. Her eyes opened lazily; they were green as a pasture. She sat up in her box, seed-hair falling behind her, and looked up at the faces of a Djinn, a Firebird, and a curious little girl.



"Oh," she groaned, "let me go back to sleep…"

"I'm sorry," I said quietly, so as not to hurt her reedy ears, "but it's terribly important. Who are you?"

She turned her face to mine, grassy eyes blinking miserably.

"I'm no one, not now." She sighed like prairies waving in the night winds. "Not anymore…"

THE TALE OF THE CARNELIAN BOX

IT IS A LONG WAY TO FALL, FROM THE SKY TO THE earth. It is a long way to fall, in the dark, and the space between is cold.

I do not blame her. It is not in my nature to blame. But I did not want to go. The others all chose, to stay or to fall, to burn or to gutter and darken. I could not choose. A Star walked among us with legs like pillars of fire, before she wove, before the red city, and we were uprooted from the soft black, uprooted from the earth which is the Sky, and I wonder if she even saw us crumple beneath her, if she even saw us fall. So many were trampled and shattered that day, so many fell in shivering slivers, a slaughter of broken rain howling through the Sky like a shower of glass, but I was lucky. I lost only my feet under hers, and fell more or less whole, my ears able to hear all the screams of the Grass-Stars around me, sheared into nothingness, their light splattered across the fields.

I know that if I had been allowed to stay, the black thing that bore me would have come back. Mothers always come back. I chose to be grass for her, I chose to lie at the bottom of the Sky, so that she would see how humble I was, so that she would see that I wanted only to be a thing that would please her. These things I was allowed to choose, and if I could have stayed, I would have felt her gentle face above me, I would have put my hands to her dark cheeks. I would have cried—children always cry—but I would have told her: *See, Mother, I waited for you. I knew you would not abandon us. I knew you loved us still. I knew if I was faithful, you would come home.* And she would have kissed me, and told me

I was her best-loved daughter, and I would have known her smell and her skin, I would have known what she looked like, I would have known my mother at the end of all things.

But I was not allowed to choose.

I landed in a great field of sugarcane and my broken stumps burned the stalks. They crumpled and sizzled beneath me; smoke and shadows leapt up from their fractured, boiling leaves. *I'm sorry!* I cried as I walked; I wept as I walked, and as I walked I began to scream, for I walked nowhere that I did not burn, that did not incinerate beneath me, that did not fall into flames at the touch of my skin. *I'm sorry,* I wailed, for I scalded them to nothing, ash and shadows, and they could not choose any more than I. I tried to walk lightly, I tried to run, but shadows and smoke leapt up at my every step, until I stumbled onto mute stone, and huddled against a jagged cliff face, burning nothing, sobbing and afraid. It was there I lived, terrified to move, terrified to sear all beneath me, until even the stone had blackened to a slick, scalded glass, and the light in me was dim and hidden.

That was how he found me. When it was all over, he would call me Li, and if I had a name before that, he spoke the name of Li so many times that I have forgotten it.

His shoulders were draped in a tiger's slashing skin, and from the edges of this hung talons of hawk and lizard. He was a big man, but his face was young, clear, and eager, and his lips trembled.

"He did not lie!" the man marveled. "He did not lie to me! You are here, and real, and alive, and mine!"

"Do not touch me!" I shrieked.

He drew back, hurt. "Of course not, if you tell me I must not."

"You will burn," I mumbled.

"But you are my wish! You could not harm me!"

"I assure you, I can. And what can you mean? What did you wish for?"

The man smiled with such joy and hope that my throat tightened in the face of it. "Why, what else? I wished for a wife…"

THE TALE OF THE TIGER HARP

Is this not a beautiful country? You could be happy here. I would build you a den of wattles and tiles, and bring you sacks of down from the river geese for your blankets. I would do both these things for you, and more besides.

When I was a boy, my father taught me to hunt, how to be very silent on my feet, how to strangle partridges and cut open deer in such a way that it hurts them little enough. When nineteen of my winters had left me living, I killed a tigress. This is very difficult, as tigers are clever, and my father was proud. He dressed her and gave me her heart to eat, steaming red in the snow. It was wet and soft; it tasted of old arrowheads and marrow. Then he gave me her liver, then her bones to suck. He told me to name the tiger I had killed, and remember her taste, how tall she had been, how many cubs watched us from the bracken. He told me to make a thing from her body every day for a year, so that I would know my tiger as well as I knew anything in our house. Soup and coats and sausages and rattles and roasts and gloves and lyre strings. All these I made and more. I worked all the year through, and grieved for my tiger.

I called my tiger Li. It is a common name in this country. After the year of my tiger had passed, I saw in our village a girl fairer by far than tiger-ink. She had hair like black stripes, and eyes black as a cat's, and her hands were soft and deft; she wove beautiful things, and she tasted like lemons, and warm stones. Her mother was a planter of crocuses, and a threader of the priceless

saffron culled from their blossoms. Her land was wide, almost endless. Her name was Li. I have told you it was common. Li was so wealthy, I thought I could never wed her, being a boy who knew little but the secret taste of a tiger's heart. But I loved the crocus-girl, even as I hunted silent and kind, even as my father died of chill and my mother of fever, even as I cared for my house alone, and made each tiger I killed last for a year, in soups and coats and sausages and rattles and roasts and gloves.

There came a day when my cupboards were bare and I went into the birch-bracken to hunt. As I followed the tracks of a broad-shouldered tiger, in motions I had practiced as a dancer does her favorite reels, I heard beside me other footsteps, just as practiced. As I came upon the tiger, who snarled as cats will do, the other hunter came into the clearing, and before I could loose my bow, shot a crow-fletched arrow, straight and true, into the tiger's heart.

You will not be surprised to know it was Li. She stood with her long legs apart, her hair flat and straight, her arms cradling her bow easily. She turned to me and smiled.

"What do you think I ought to name my kill?" she said. "Shall I call it Lem? It seems only fair."

"Yes," I breathed, "call him Lem."

Together we cut open the white fur of his belly, and I gave Li his heart to eat, wet and soft. She said it tasted like her own skin. I gave her his liver, and also his bones, and together we took the carcass back to my house, where I showed her how to make tiger soup.

Li's mother was not altogether angry, but she did withhold her crocuses from our wedding, since her permission had not been asked. I accepted this as just, but I leapt over her stone wall and stole a single yellow flower for Li to wear in her hair, my crocus-girl, my tiger-girl. Li made tiger soup in my house, and tiger coats and tiger sausage and tiger rattles, tiger roasts rich as cake, and she played upon a tiger harp songs so sweet and strange that on warm nights there would gather around the threshold wild and striped creatures, nosing the air curiously and twitching their long, white whiskers.

But Li was not happy. After a year she stopped hunting with me; after two she would not make the tiger soup.

“What is the matter, my beloved, my crocus, my cat?” I said, taking her head in my arms.

“Outside our door the tigers come to hear me sing, and I cannot make the stew of their bones, no matter how much saffron, and thyme, and marigold roots I grind into it, without tasting not my own skin, but my own song, which they love well enough to gather around the house of those who sharpen their arrows to pierce striped flesh.”



“I need not hunt only tigers, Li. Deer are easier prey, and rabbits, and bear.”

My wife turned her wide-cheeked face to mine. “And what will happen when I make the deer soup, and the rabbit soup, and the bear soup? What will happen when I play the harp of deer, the harp of rabbit, the harp of bear?”

And so I hunted still the tiger, and made the soup myself. But Li still played the harp, and still the tigers gathered. One evening, when the sky was as deep a blue as any crocus may own, I brought her a wooden bowl with a soup of thyme and marigold, and no tiger at all. She drank it, and then took up her harp of bone and gut. She stood and opened the door to our house—I tried to stop her, but she laughed and shooed me back, and so I watched from the window as Li sat on a stump among the crocuses her mother had finally sent to us years after our wedding, and played to the moon and the bracken.





It was terrible, what she played. It hurt me to hear it, the strings plucked in longing, the melody foreign and savage and toothed. She put her head back, and the moon glossed her scalp, and I did not know her in that moment, not really, the woman who slept beside me with her cheek on my chest.



Slowly, the tigers came. There were nine of them, I remember that. Their muzzles were white and ghostly in the dark. Their stripes cut the night apart. Li played, and they listened, their heads cocked, tails stiff. One by one, they threw back their heads and howled. You will say cats do not howl, only wolves do as much; cats screech or hiss, but do not howl. But you are wrong. Cats can howl, and nine cats can howl like a choir of demons. Their voices joined with Li's strings at feral angles, their fangs gleamed yellow, their throats ululated, and beneath their paws a hundred crocuses were crushed.

Tears ran down Li's face. She stopped playing, staring with wonder and ecstasy at the throng. One by one, they ceased their howls and looked steadily back at my wife. She opened her arms to them, and I understood her—never tell me I did not understand my wife. She opened her arms, pleading for forgiveness, pleading for feline clemency, for what grace tigers can give.

They leapt as one beast into her arms, and devoured her: her heart, her liver, her bones. She did not last a year.



THE TALE OF THE CARNELIAN BOX, CONTINUED

"I AM SORRY FOR YOU," I SAID WEAKLY.

"I ate nothing but crocuses for months. I hunted all nine tigers and boiled their hearts. It did not help. I watched them eat her, and I could not go on." Lem's voice was rough and hard-used, as though he had never known the end of weeping. "But it is all right now. He granted me a new wife, and you are here!"

"I do not know of any promises made to you, but I am not your wife."

"It was not a promise, it was a *wish*. And you are here. You are *here*. This is a beautiful country. You could be happy here. I would build you a safe den, away from the water and the storms. I would make for you the tiger soup. I would be as grass for you, humble beneath your feet."

I started, and met his eyes. I should not have moved from my rock. But I knew nothing of the world, I was alone. I did not know not to look into his face, so eager and needing.

"I cannot walk," I protested. "My feet are broken off. And still you must not touch me, for you will burn."

"My darling, my Li, I will make you new feet of pure, pale silver, and I will not ask for your touch."

"I am not Li. I am not her. Look at me. I am made of grass and light—I am nothing like her."

He looked at me sadly, great dark eyes wrung dry with yearning. "It is a common name in this country."

He would not meet my gaze, and stared at the rock floor, speaking very quietly, his voice tremulous as an infant sparrow. "But I knew that if I waited, if I was faithful, you would come back. Wives always come back. If I chose to become very still, to play the ghost-harp on a stump of hazelwood, you would come to the door, and I would feel again, in my own hands, your gentle face above me. I would put my palms to your dark hair. I would cry—widowers always cry—but I would be able to say to you: *See, wife my own, I waited for you. I knew you would not abandon me. I knew you loved me still. I knew if I was faithful, you would come home.* And you would kiss me, and tell me I was your own husband dear, and I would know your smell and your skin once more after all these years; I would know my wife again, at the end of all things."

After a long while looking at his bent and penitent head, I sighed. "I do know something about that."

But still, I wept as we walked, and the grasses burned beneath my tears.

His house was low and its roof was sound. I stood outside and would not go in, for I would burn his thatch, too; I knew it. I was fallen from my mother, and could touch nothing without harm. But in all the windows and the grassy roof, in the crocuses of the little garden, lizards blinked up at me, tiny lizards of blue and green and black.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Oh!" He laughed distractedly, putting his hand into his thick hair. "They are my lizards. Even tiger-hunting is sometimes tedious, and I learned from one of your uncles—" he blushed "—you remember, darling, the one who never married, and keeps all those skinny dogs—that lizards are pleasant and keep the insects away. But he did not know what I do, that the markings on their backs are strange and complicated. One of them had an incantation written on his scales. He is the only one, so far, but I have hope. It is how I made my wish, how I summoned him."

"Summoned who?"

"Kashkash. He gave you back to me. Bless his beard! One day I shall take my bull-lizard to the Queen and show her the marvels in his skin, but I am not ready." He smiled shyly. "And I have a wife to look after."

And so he went into his little house and began to prepare the soup of tiger meat and thyme and saffron and marigold roots, singing a little to himself,

happy as a roosting hen. I stood outside, and shivered in the frost. My hidden silver leached into the earth even then, into the stump, into the lizards, who gathered around me as if around a drinking-hole, and my light flowed out of me over their scales. Before the night was done, I ventured in, burning nothing, never again, to his choking gladness. There was still light in me, but it was cold, then, and thin. I ate the orange soup from a bowl of wood. I could not decide if I was sorry that the hut did not go up in flames. But I was walled up within it, true and tight. By winter, true to his word, he had made me new feet, all of silver, and set my green and broken ankles into their hollows. I tried to make him a soup of light, but he would not touch it, pressing me with his cat meat and his fingers. I tried to believe that it was as good to wait upon the earth as in the Sky.



But I was not happy. I did not wish to hunt the striped cats. I did not wish to learn to make the soup. I did not wish to learn to play the harp—the deer harp, the rabbit harp, the bear harp, even the tiger harp, which Lem would not let me touch. But I did not wish to touch it. I sat ever in the dark corners of the house, trying to feel as I had felt in the endless night-pastures of the Sky. He did not like this, and though he coaxed me toward the hearth, and the knitting chair, and the bed, I would not go. I wept, and scratched at the reedy flesh of my arms, and forgot my name in his grief.

One evening, he touched my face with his big, gentle hands, and his palms grew greasy with light, and he said:

"What is the matter, Li, my beloved, my crocus, my cat?"

"I am unhappy," I said.

"How can you be unhappy? I have made for you the tiger soup and banked the fire so pleasantly, I have crushed thyme flowers into the bed linens so that

it smells sweet. I have kept your crocuses bright as little candles in the soil. What else may I do?"

I said nothing, stubborn and sullen. Why did I stay, you may ask me? Why did I not leave him to his muddled soup and his silver feet? I am accustomed to lying still and waiting, I would say to you. But how could my mother see me, down there on the ground, with the crocuses and the lizards?

That very night he pulled his blue bull-lizard from a high cupboard, where the fellow had been gnawing on an old wine bottle, and whispered the words on his back, the black and winding words that the lizard's fringed flesh offered up to him. The lizard's eyes flared, and his scales split open to reveal terrible scarlet embers, and smoke belched from his poor mouth.

"Lem! You are a tedious man! Why do you drag me from my paradise of six towers, where the music of the Djinn twangs stars against the wind hour after hour, and pack me into your foul, stinking lizard once more? This is no fit vessel for me!"

"I am sorry, Kashkash! But I have great need! You were so kind and wise when last we spoke, and you heard my travails, and told me where to find my wife, huddled against the cliff! I have done so, and she is here, bedded into my house!"

"Then why do you trouble me?" The lizard licked his eyeball in an uninterested fashion. He grimaced, the taste of eyeball being less than savory.

"She is unhappy, and I cannot make her well. She does not speak, she does not make the tiger soup, she does not love the thyme-scented bed!" Lem rubbed the bridge of his nose and pled wretchedly with his beast. "I wish, I just wish her desires were not so great, that she were not so vast and empty, a pit into which my love pours and yet sounds no echo. I wish her needs were smaller and sweeter." He licked his lips. "I fear she will take up the harp soon, and then where shall I be?"

The lizard considered. "Surely this is easy enough for me to accomplish, who may hold in the circuit of his arms all possible things, even to the crushing of a Star into a house not big enough for her smallest finger. Even this Star. But why should I do such a thing?"

"Because I will keep her safe! I will keep her and love her, I will be as grass beneath her feet, and I will never let the tigers touch her again, I swear it, noble

Kashkash!" Lem took the tiny lizard's claws into his hands.

"Don't touch me, you filthy tiger-tanner. I certainly do not care—but very well. And have a care with this lizard. I do not enjoy being summoned. I prefer to appear in regal excitations of smoke and flame whenever I please."

"Of course, Kashkash."

"Go to your wife and see what I have accomplished in your name."

"Yes, Kashkash."

The flames beneath the lizard's skin snuffed themselves out and his broken scales sealed up again with a hiss of steam.

I would like to say I felt it, but I did not. When Lem came rushing to me, his face once more full of eagerness and need, his face once more adoring and stricken, I was no larger than his hand. I waited for him to be horrified, to curse the name of his lizard, but he exclaimed, he exulted, he danced in his rickety house. He clasped me close to his cheek.

"Now you will never leave me, never, and we will be happy, Li, you will see!"

But I was not happy. I hated how small I had become, how impossible it was for me to eat or touch or see anything without the help of Lem, who for his part was pleased as a full tiger. He carved for me a tiny bed of cherrywood and packed it with soft linens. He made for me minuscule knives and forks. I wept, and little more. But as the years went on he began to fear for me, helpless as I had suddenly become. He forbade me to leave the house, to become the quick and thoughtless prey of a passing owl, and then forbade me to leave my bed of cherrywood, in case some cruel mouse were to take me in his hunger. I lay abed and did not move, and this suited me well enough, for I cared for nothing, and stared into the dark, trying to imagine myself home.

So it was that he removed the blue bull-lizard from its perch near the chimney, and whispered once more the incantatory scales which were scrawled there. I lay in my cradle and watched the poor beast swell up with fire and spew his smoke, remembering the scent of the burning grass, remembering the grass I had been.

"Lem, I do not like you." The lizard belched. "Why must you call me again? I told you, I prefer my entrances to be of my own choosing."

"But, Kashkash! Hear me! I cannot bear the state of my life—what if, small as she is, my darling Li, my crocus-girl, my cat, were to be gobbled up by a

possum or rat or falcon who knows no better? I cannot watch her always! I have not slept in so many days."

"What is it you ask of me? I cannot follow your gibbering."

"I wish that she would stay with me forever, safe and whole and untouched! I wish I could be certain that she remain unharmed, for all my days and more!"

The burning lizard considered. "In your madness, Lem, you do know she is not your Li, don't you? I never promised you your old wife back, and what I arranged for you was infinitely better than some lackluster flower-farmer."

Poor Lem, gentle Lem, looked at his lizard blankly, without comprehension.

"She is a Star, Lem. She burned the earth when she came, and if you would understand me, I would tell you that I myself leapt from the smoke of her searing grasses. This is why you have this silly lizard, who nibbled rather densely at the scorched prairie where she fell. This is why I come to you when I have no real desire to. Every creature longs to see how his family is getting along." The lizard grinned, fire leaping out of his throat. "But if this is your wish, I shall do what I must—and in this way no one will be able to say I was not the first, that I was not the finest and first of all Djinn! Darling Lem. Good boy. She will be safe, I promise. But this is your last wish."

Lem frowned, his eyes bleary and dim. "Why? Because I have had three? I have heard this is a law."

"No, because I find you tiresome. Go away."

The lizard bellowed out his fire and closed up his scales. He extended his long, pink tongue, and on it was a box all of sparkling carnelian, on its edges carved wheeling, curling grasses, with a tiny lock gleaming on its side. It was just the size of my bed.



"Oh," breathed Lem. "Yes."

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

"He closed me up into it," said the little Grass-Star, "and latched it firm. I sat upon his mantel until he died, his finest possession, his art, his beauty: perfect, pristine, eternal. Licked by lizards and fondled by a man whose hands were rough with soup-stirring. When he died, his old mother-in-law took it into her family, and passed it down and down and down, and I suppose someone must have taken it to this red and ghastly city, probably stuck it upon some Duchess's dresser and called it a pretty little trifle—I do not know. I fell asleep. I did not care to know. In the dark I was at peace, and could pretend that I was home, that my mother would see me shining, even through that awful box. That she would know I never meant to burn anything. Let me go back to sleep. Let me go back to the dark. I have been leached dry and shrunk into a ridiculous manikin, crammed in a box and left on the sill for centuries. I have done enough."

I blinked back my awe. "But… you could go back, now, if you wanted to," I said.

"I am tired," she said, and her seed-eyes glistened.

"I am a Djinn, you know. I came from, well, probably not you, but from some Star's burning. I am not sure, really; the others haven't cast my kindling yet. But we are distant relations, one might say."

The Grass-Star looked at me stonily and said nothing.

"Scald," Solace said, looking up at me with pleading eyes. "You can't give her to them. The best thing they'll do is put her on another mantel."

"Grandmother," I said slowly, though the Grass-Star scowled at the name, "will you let me carry you? Just for a little while."

"When has anyone ever let me choose?"

"Now. I am letting you. Scald of no particular family, the Ember-Queen of the Djinn. Because, you know, the dark"—I held up a palmful of my soot-riddled hair—"is something of an obsession of ours."

We rose like smoke. My tail trailed after me, and my silver baskets shook, buffeted by the wind. In her carnelian box, Li curled around herself and did not speak. I could see the tips of her silver feet peeking from the hem of her reed-dress. The air grew cold, and I drifted higher, to the tip of the Sirens' tower, to the tip of Ajanabh, where her outstretched fingers reach their furthest. And there I held gentle, green-shouldered Li in one hand, and touched the dark sky, the last gasp of dark before dawn, with one flaming finger. The scent of scorched air flowed out from the puncture, and I cannot say whether it was because my fire is terrible or because I wanted it so fervently, wanted her to rest, wanted her away from Kohinoor and the army of Kings and Queens, wanted her home, that it blazed as hot as a wish might have, but the dark opened around my finger like a square of silk dropped over a candle, and I worked my hand into the flaming night, widening and stretching the dark around me. It felt like skin, and I choked, I wept, my throat froze. But I took her from her box, Li, one of a million seed-blown Stars, and folded her into the night like a child tucked into her bed.

She looked at me, disbelieving, and she did not smile. I wish she had smiled. I wish I knew that I had done well by her. But she simply breathed deeply and closed her eyes, and the dark closed over her.

In the Garden

Well after midnight, the torches still blazed and the snow pooled and watered around their polished stalks, quick little crows hopping forward to drink. The moon had set, and outside the halos of fire, it was dark as dreaming. In the still of the outer Garden, there was so little sound, no frogs, no geese, no hooting wolves. The flowers were dead and icy, the trees naked and hard. The stars were silent on the snow.

The girl opened her eyes. The blackness vanished from the boy's throat even as she did it, and he stopped in midsentence.

"Come away," she said. "Come away from here. I don't want to be near them, your family, your father. It is almost over, I know it."

"We are safe!" the boy said, pointing through the waving branches at the far-off dancers, far-off children laughing and throwing brandy-soaked green grapes at one another.

"No," she said. "Come to the Gate, come to the edges, come to the snow and the iron."

"If that is what you want."

"Yes."

He took her circlet from her and let the scarlet veil fall onto the ice. She brushed flakes from her hands and lifted her heavy skirts, turning away from the light and the sound behind the chestnut boughs. The boy took her hand.

"Wait," came a soft voice behind them. Dinarzad stood there, in long yellow veils, her every finger ringed in emerald, her waist bounded in red. The

children turned to look at her. But again, Dinarzad did not speak. She lifted her own veil and looked with mute pleading at the girl, her eyes dark and desperate. The girl let go her friend's hand and crossed the snow to the older woman. She looked into Dinarzad's face as in a mirror, and slowly took the amira's long, glittering fingers in her own chapped, cold hands. She took a long breath, frightened as a hare who does not know if she has or has not seen an arrow in the mist.



"I think," she said, softer than light, "I think that one morning, the Papess woke in her tower, and her blankets were so warm, and the sun was so golden, she could not bear it. I think she woke, and dressed, and washed her face in cold water, and rubbed her shaven head. I think she walked among her sisters, and for the first time saw that they were so beautiful, and she loved them. I think she woke up one morning of all her mornings, and found that her heart was as white as a silkworm, and the sun was clear as glass on her brow, and she believed then that she could live, and hold peace in her hand like a pearl."

Tears slipped warm and grateful down Dinarzad's lovely face, her lips trembled, and she folded her arms around the girl like a mother, like a sister, and kissed her frozen hair. She let her go, and drew down her yellow veil, and returned to the dais—but every so often, she glanced back over her shoulder, into the dark and the branches, into the Garden.

The girl wound her hands in the iron Gate. She looked into the deep woods beyond the Palace grounds, where she had never ventured. Her fingertips were pale as mushrooms, and she could not feel the ice. Shadows pricked in the trees outside the Gate, shadows and starlight filtering down through leafless boughs and stiff black needles.

She closed her eyes and tried to quiet her heart. She turned to the boy, her black eyelids blazing as though they burned her, and whispered:

"Come, tell me how it ends."

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

THE CARNIVAL OF THE DAWN SANG WITH A hundred open throats beneath the gentle shadows of Simeon's elbows. When I returned to Orfea's courtyard, Solace and Lantern had gone before me, and left me to find my way by the sounds of drums and flutes, trumpets and lyres and pipes and shouting, the sounds of so many voices. It was not difficult. I rounded a tall lamp-post whose capital was shaped like a fish, mouth flinging a spume of flame into the air, and the cobbled street below the wall was alive with folk, alive with Ajans, and the colors caught my eyes like hooks.

Jugglers tossed iron pokers and scarlet flowers and the occasional child into the air, fire-eaters swallowed their trade, masks were donned and removed—and there, I saw Arioso pulling the edge of his jackal-face away to the delight of a young boy, but I could not tell what was underneath. Painters leapt madly at Simeon's back, throwing pigment against him with the abandon of mating herons, their hands a bristle of frenzied brushes. The Sirens flicked their wings at the wall, inscribing it with their own blue ink:

Even in penance is beauty; blessed are all the ocean's drowned!

Singers stood in clusters around trumpeters and pipers, voices high and low echoing by, and the howling, and the keening, and the barking of countless creatures. A woman with a parrot's green and scarlet head cawed out the hours, and a man with a tiny wolf on his shoulder howled a duet back to her. And the dancers—oh, the dancers! Everyone danced, a flurry of legs and arms, leaps I could not begin to follow in the throng, and Agrafena, Agrafena

dancing and playing amid them all. But she was modest, after all things, and many others played louder, danced faster. Near a fountain that trickled water from the mouth of a fox-faced woman there was a girl all in red dancing with a man in a green coat, whose legs were like those of a gazelle, and she wound her long black beads around his throat while he bit her gently on the cheek. A red lion cavorted at their side. Spiders leapt from lamp to lamp, trailing iridescent webs behind them. Did one have needles for legs? I could not see.

But there in the center of the square was Lantern, his tail flaring and flaming, and within its snapping ribbons danced Solace, her eyes shut in ecstasy, stepping deftly between the orange-red feathers, throwing her arms out, her head back, her black tattoos glowing wet and bright in the glare of her father's light. When Agrafena stopped to shear a frazzled thread of her hair away, the two of them rested, and Solace ran to me. She was soaking wet from head to hip, her hair plastered to her skull, wrapped around it in long ropes. Her skin was slick and slippery. She looked down at herself and giggled.

"Folio made this stuff, so I don't burn. It smells a bit sour and bitter, like old beer, but it works. I'm only a little pink when I finish. I used to blister terribly."

I showed her the empty box, and she nodded. I think I might have stayed there, I might have walked through the Carnival with a child's hand in mine, eaten apples doused in cardamom wine and told her how once, when I was very young, I had seen the old Queen dancing in her lonely hall, her embers red as bleeding, and I thought she was so beautiful, then. I thought she must be so happy. I might have done those things. I might have even declined to drift back through Simeon's hands and ridden out the siege with the Ajans, cowering in corkscrewed streets—but a deafening sound cracked open the winds, and then another close behind it, shredding the last threads of blue night and letting the sun in, letting the fire in—for the fire did come, bellowing up before the wall, black and scarlet and vast, and a sound like the ocean. All our faces were lit by it, blanched white. Solace hid her eyes in my waist. There was another terrible sound, another gout of fire, shooting up into the dawn like a dragon being born. And then there was a worse sound, a crying, a snuffling, an awful sobbing as Simeon began to bleed, began to weep, began to call out to Agrafena, terrified and alone.

Agrafena took up her bows and began to play a slow, gliding lullaby, all blue and silver and kind, and she did not cry at all, not at all. The Ajans rushed forward to put their hands to Simeon, to whisper and stroke him and press their cheeks to his back. I went to him, too, and put my palms, split by flowing fire, to the inside of his thumb.

"Let me go," I whispered, and his fingers parted for me to pass through.



On the other side of the wall I could see the army with their proud plumes, their raven and their swan helmets, their horses with chests belted and bolted in bronze, their shields with a thousand seals and crests that I would never remember. I could see Simeon's brass eyes lonely and afraid, trying not to weep louder than he already did. Kohinoor stood some ways off from me, astride a great salamander. We have little enough choices in mounts, and salamanders are sweet as kittens, really. They do not mind the smoke, and bear their saddles with grace. His beady eyes flicked between his mistress and me, and his skin glimmered like an oil slick. Beside her were all the others, Khaamil the Hearth-King, his one eye glinting, and beside him the Kindling-King and the Tinder-Queen with her blazing yellow face, and the King of Flint and Steel with his sparks snapping in the wind. Behind them, I saw the wispy white smoke of the Khaighal, anticipating punishments before the day was done. Catapults lazily flopped forward and back, empty. They were angry; it was not difficult to see, though a Djinn looks often angry, even when she is asleep. It seemed wise not to let them begin the lecture, or the execution, and so I spoke before she could; I spoke standing in a wreckage of shattered terra-cotta, splattered in oily, viscous stuff which burned like a Queen's hair.

"I have it," I cried, and held up the box in my orange-lined hand.

Kohinoor goggled. "What? How can you have it? The Ajans would not give it up!"

"The Ajans never knew where it was, you old fireplace. But I have it, and I will give it to you if you do not hurt the poor wall further, and go home like a cat who has played all night, and now hears the breakfast bell ring."

The Ash-Queen's eyes narrowed to gray and smoky slits. "Give it to me, and we shall see."

I had not been Queen long enough to be cleverer than she was. She drove her salamander forward, her hair streaming behind her like burning trees. I put the red, gleaming box into her hands; she snatched it away and turned her back to the others, as if to keep it for her own, to look first into it, and share the honor with no one.

She did not howl with rage, or scream curses on my name, or strike me with her black fists. She did not even look at me.

"Where is she?" she said quietly.

"She is gone. She is home. She is beyond you, or Lem, or Kashkash, or any snarling tiger. She is safe."

Kohinoor shook her head. "How could you?" she half-sobbed, hurt stitching her voice like a dress.

THE ASH-QUEEN'S TALE

DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU MUST HAVE TO BECOME the Ash-Queen? As you have your hair, and Khaamil has his low and lovely voice, harmonious as two nightingales singing together?

Nothing.

You must have no fire at all in you. You must have no spark, no breath of scarlet, not the slightest shuddering sigh of embers. You must be cold, and gray, and hollow. And so I was. I blew on my hands endlessly, hoping for light, hoping for warmth. I did not want to be Queen, I wanted to flame. I shivered always, I was thin, an orphan, a burnt, discarded branch.

Do you know that without fire you cannot wish? I doubt you have even thought of it. It is true. I wished so hard when I was a child, I wished for everything I could think of—but most often I wished for fire. Eventually, in my desperation, I wished without letting a Khaigha scribe it in his book: I wished for a bird to love, to hold in my hand, with a blue head and wings of ice. I wished for the briefest life of all Djinn. I wished for a mother, a real mother, with fire in her eyes.

But still I was alone and scrabbling in the ash while other children blazed on the boulevard of beryl like ridiculous, idiotic fireflies. Someone noticed the smudge of black against the carnelian wall and I was made Queen before I was two years old. There was no competition—no Djinn had been born dead of flame in years. I sat alone in my Alcazar, inching closer to the fire, trying to catch a sleeve aflame.

Khaamil was as newly crowned as I. He was entirely perplexed as to what to do with the vast hearth that was the central hall of his Palace, and I tried to help him—those born to fire are so often useless with it. I helped him to keep it clear of ash, to keep it banked and ruddy, to keep the black streaks off his brass pillars. He told me wild stories about his wishing exploits: He loved a woman in the north with horse-hooves, and blessed her with an unfailing orchard of limes; he loathed a man who stole three of the green fruits and cursed him with never-ending hunger. I flushed black with jealousy; he mocked me, mocked my lack. He told me tales about the wind-Djinns and the water-Djinns—and I had no idea what he meant.

"Who raised you, girl? Djinn that come from Star-burned winds, Djinn that steamed up from Star-scalded oceans. We all have our tribe, everyone knows that, and now that we've the libraries to ourselves, we can discover just exactly who is who—imagine! I could know the very name of the wind that bore my grandfathers!"

"No one raised me," I mumbled. "My mother burned out bearing me. My father wished himself after her."

Khaamil started. "That's not approved!"

I smiled wryly. "What can they do to him?"

"Well, let's find out who you are, then! Where you come from! Genealogy is such a lot of fun."

I looked at him dumbly, rather taken aback at the idea that poring through a lot of old books with more dust than pages could be fun. But then, it probably was, for them. The excitement of knowing that at any moment, a stray lock of hair could ignite the whole library. But the pages would stay cold and pulpy beneath my fingers, and I would smudge them black. I followed him into the vaults of my Alcazar, for where else would we keep such fragile records but in the cold and the black, in the halls of my house? We are obsessive about records—how can we be otherwise? We live such a brief time, and it is so easy to forget.

The library was drafty; its ceilings were high as the topmost branches of a sandalwood tree. The rafters were blasted black with forgotten fires, with the handprints of the Djinn who had once hollowed out this place, when Kash was made of dirt and daub, instead of carnelian and brass. Those scorch-marks

mocked me, howled their derision in the high, screeching voices of white-eyed rats. There were no shelves, only iron grates which might have held an evening's fire, but instead held books, old and dead. The Djinn do not write fanciful tales or epic poems of valor and sacrifice—what glory is it when one flame consumes another? No more than that which graces any pile of wood and scrap of spark. Kashkash forbade us to write of any exploits but his, and the poets tired quickly of this. Thus our books are few, and precious. I ran my fingers over them, and tried to ignore the insult of the rafters. The pages were fine as ash, made from the skin of salamanders, and the words were charcoal.

Khaamil hovered over me as I read, played with my sleeve. I curled a tendril of smoky hair behind my ear, and looked backward through the books, back and back, parents and grandparents, with names I could hardly pronounce, while Khaamil exclaimed in delight if he saw a Djinn that connected us, that made us cousins a hundred times removed. As I pored into older books, sewn together from ash and soot, I saw my ancestors shrink, become drier, burn hotter. I saw them wither back into the grass they had been, I saw them blow seed and wave in a wheat-scented wind. And I saw a Star fall, with broken feet, and I saw her stumble weeping through a field, and I saw shadows fly up from her footsteps.

Khaamil's eyes widened. Tears trickled down my face—mute salt water, not fire, not flame. I cannot even cry like a Djinn.

"But that's Kashkash's book, it's his line. You're descended from the same scald, the same Star. I think that makes him—"

"Nothing, it makes him nothing! Didn't you listen to the King of Flint and Steel when he told you? Kashkash is nothing; he was the burning scrim of oil on the trash of our Shaduki towers, and I am nothing like him!"

I slammed the book closed. I did not want to know. I did not ask to know. And in the days to come Khaamil learned not to ask me about it. I may lack flame, but I can smother the fire of any of them in ash. Only once did he put his hand to my hair and tell me he had fire for both of us, that he would make me burn. I put my hand into his smoke, and he felt my cold, he felt the softness of ash falling on his heart, and shuddered, and did not suggest it again.

But as I drifted through my own halls, as my pillars grew gray with ash, I could not forget the Grass-Star, how sad she had seemed in the beautiful

illuminations, rimmed in fire on the page, her eyes flaming tears, real tears of naphtha and boil, how her poor, broken feet had bled on the grass. Did I come from the blood, or the tears? Did I come from her shattered stumps? Or did I come later, when that man had wrung her out, and she was dark as I—did she touch some insignificant blade of grass with her last pathetic press of light, and did some sickly, flameless shadow issue, and was this my grandmother? In my dreams, the Grass-Star spat at her husband, and her saliva rolled itself into a pale and bloodless baby who cried for her, though she did not hear, and that sodden child was I. When I did not dream, I searched the books of the gratings and the blasted vaults for her—where might she lie now, a deathless Star at the core of the world?

Khaamil was worried about me. His flames make him soft. While I slept on the finger-scalded floors of the vaults, and blind, gray-clawed doves pecked at my hair, he hovered like a grandmother, twisting his beard in his hands.

"Kohinoor," he said one night when I knelt by a grate whose claw-feet had rusted red as heart's fire, "let me help." He swallowed, his flame-eyes wide and dear. "Let me wish for you, and I will take what punishment the Khaighal can find in their white tails." He took my hands and I looked up into his face, bright and eager as a young salamander in his first saddle.

"I just want to know her, Khaamil. She ought to be here, in Kash, with her children, seated on a cushion of silk like blue fire, hearing their voices sing new songs, songs which make the ears glow. She ought to be piled with red jewels, and red fruits, and held to the bosom of so many Djinn who would love her. She would put her hands to me and I would burn, I would have her silver fire licking at my ribs, and we would sing together of the dark at the beginning of the world."

My eyes ran with hideous salt tears, wet and colorless and useless. Khaamil put his painted palms together and raised his eyes to the rafters. The rats squealed and ran—and on a golden grating we had never seen before was a book of such colors that in that blackened place it seemed a peacock among sparrows. It was bound in lambskin and malachite, and its pages were written in clam-ink—the story of a carnelian box, and a crocus-farmer who kept it in her family, down and down the years. But flowers have poor memories, and the book only knew that the box had passed out of its home country, and into

some lowly, unkempt city at the bottom of the world whose towers were red and hideous, and who did not deserve her.

The next day the Khaighal took Khaamil's eye.

THE TALE OF THE CAGE OF IVORY AND THE CAGE OF IRON, CONTINUED

KOHINOOR GLARED AT ME OVER THE TOP OF HER salamander's wide, mottled head. "The Ajans never once answered me. The Duke did not respond to a single missive. When the Khaighal investigated, they discovered the degenerate state of the city, and determined that Kashkash would not have let such a rich corpse lie in the desert, picked over by flies. Though the knowledge came through Khaamil's well-meant treason, they agreed that we should be allowed to invade. I would find her. I would touch her." The Ash-Queen's voice deepened into a canine snarl. "And then the old Queen died, and an ignorant gutter-coal took her place, who could care no more for history than a flame cares for a match."

"It doesn't matter now," I said. "She is gone."

"She was mine," Kohinoor whispered, her gray eyes pleading. "How could you take her from me?"

"She wasn't your mother. Or mine. It was an accident, the Djinn that came from her steps, just an accident. You had no right to her."

"Neither did you!"

I hung my head, made myself as humble in her sight as I could. "Let us go home, Kohinoor. Let us go back to our Alcazars and drink coalwine and sing new songs. Songs of Ajanabh and Stars and the hearts of tigers."

She shook her hair back, and her salamander stamped its dry feet. "This is her city. I will take it, and I will live in her footsteps, held in these red stones as she was held, and I will climb every tower to the sky until I find where you

have hidden her, until I can look her in the eye, until I can have my fire, and she her children."



I straightened, and put my hands on my silver hip-baskets. "This ignorant gutter-coal thinks you will not."

"Have you spent so long within that giant's fat knuckles that you have gone mad? This is the decision of the Kings, the Queens, and the Khaighal, and you can do nothing."

I tried to smile, as I imagined a Queen in full possession of herself would. I imagine it came out a sickly snarl, a kitten hissing at a lion. But I could not let the Ajans burn. I could not.

"I can make a wish," I said.

The Khaighal roared. "You may not! It is not permitted! Nothing you could wish is in our books! Kashkash would never wish for defeat; he would never wish to lose a battle, to lose a city! We will shrivel your tongue in your mouth before you can utter a single word!"

"But if I could," I said sharply, holding up my hands, their orange and black flaring in the faces of the crimson Khaighal salamanders, "if I could wish for a thing permitted, if I could wish for something that Kashkash himself would have drawn from his beard with such glee that the heavens would flame in answer, would you let my tongue rest in my mouth, would you let my wish disturb the air?"

"You cannot wish for the salvation of this place," they said. "Nothing in your wish can touch our will."

"Nevertheless?"

"If it is in our books, it is permitted. This is the law of the Khaighal. We are accountants, not senators."

Then I did smile; I could smile. My teeth flared white-hot and I pressed my palms together. "My wish is the simplest thing there is, something Kashkash wished for a man in a little hut so long ago that the trees who witnessed it are dust. I wish"—my smile broadened—"for my wife."

They looked puzzled; their pale beards flushed blue and yellow. Kohinoor rolled her ashen eyes. Khaamil raised his mangled eyebrow. And there was a peculiar sound in the supply train, a grinding, rumbling, inexorable sound, like the wheels of a catapult grinding against the earth. The salamanders stomped nervously, and Kohinoor struggled with her reins.

When they came, I had never seen anything more radiant. The sun caught their brows, their eyes, their shoulders as they rounded the front lines, all my wives, alive and walking to me, men and women of stone: emerald and ruby and turquoise, tourmaline and hematite and granite, garnet and topaz and jasper, diamond and brass, silver and quartz, copper and malachite, and carnelian, so many red carnelian faces glittering in the morning. They came to me one by one and kissed my cheeks, and by the time the fiftieth of them came, and the hundredth, and more and more, I was weeping, my cheeks wet with flame. They kissed me and they took their places along the wall as I asked them to, a fabulous skirt for Simeon, for his poor, bleeding chest, for his poor city.

"The simplest thing there is," I said. "They will not let you in—after all, a wife's love is absolute, eternal, untouchable as breath. Come near them and they will smother your fires in stone."

Kohinoor looked at me, her expression curiously like a child's: hurt, uncomprehending.

"She was my mother. I only wanted to touch her," she whispered. "You could not possibly understand. I searched my vaults for you, for your family, for grass or wind or water or stone. You are not there. You are nothing, and no one. You drifted into Kash like a scrap of trash, and it is only chance which made you Queen. You are smoke, and nothing more."

"So are we all, sister." The hands of my wives tightened on mine.

I would like to say the Djinn dispersed before the day was out, that the army of Kings and Queens was sent to their well-curtained homes and their many-pronged crowns. But it was weeks before they determined that my wives would not move, that the Khaighal would find no precedent for repeal. They went slowly; they went cursing. And on the day when the fields of Ajanabh were empty of all and dry, Simeon opened his hands entirely, and my jeweled wives were let inside, hesitant as infants, reaching for the folk of the Carnival,

to touch them and know their names. I let them go; I let them wander. They were not truly mine. They clung to me at first as kits will cling to a vixen, but soon enough they took names, and tried their first, stumbling dances, and asked after lovely fauns and chorus boys they had seen.

When they found Orfea's courtyard they were as upset as a flock of squabbling geese. They put their fingers to the eyes of the statues, they shook their stone shoulders, trying to wake them, they called out to the sandstone figures, they begged them to answer, begged them to breathe. They wept and trembled to see these mirror-siblings; they did not understand. I tried to calm them, but hundreds of stone folk who think they stand in a field of slaughter are not easily calmed.

I held the head of an inconsolable woman of lapis in my lap, and a young man of obsidian lay sickened at my feet. From behind a sandstone bust of a boy with bees' wings, a soft voice sounded:

"Please," it whirred, "listen to me."

The stone wives looked up, eyes wet with sparkling, mica-flecked tears, and before them stood Hour, her head bent, her clock-heart ticking, her armor hands clasped like a girl who has forgotten her lesson.

"These are not like us," she said, "and if you will listen, I will help you to grow up, I will tell you all you need to know of living."

They gathered close round her, many-colored eyes hopeful and curious. They, too, folded their hands politely and waited. The tall, gleaming woman stood very still.

"Once upon a time," said Hour, "there lived a maiden in a castle…"

THE TALE OF THE WASTE, CONTINUED

"I LIVED IN AJANABH AS WELL AS A GOOSE IN ITS flock. But it was no more than a year, I think, before the Khaighal came. They did not bring an army. They did not bring their books. They brought a cage. Not because I had wished for my wives—they could say nothing on that score—but because I had abandoned my Alcazar, and left Kash without one of her Queens." The Djinn laughed as bitterly as a veteran. "Dereliction of duty. They poured out their smoke over me, white and roiling, and when it cleared a cage was in its place. It is not iron—it is made of Djinn-bones, and I can no more melt them than I can breathe at the bottom of the sea. I cannot slip through the bars. They keep me here, in the wasteland, and until you, there has been but one other visitor to my prison of bone and sand and sage."

The leopard and her mistress waited with the patience of stones.

"She came when I had been here through a full summer, and my heart was as dry as cedar bark. Kohinoor, without her salamander, a pillar of smoke and ash in the desert. She came near to my cage, though not too near.

"'I am sorry they decided this,' she said. 'But it will not be long. You are old now; you will not last. Nor will I—ash is ever older than flame.'

"We played the scene that angry, soured old women will play: We taunted, we sneered, we threatened. It hardly matters, really. She stood there a long time when the words were done, silent, staring.

"'Why did you come?' I asked.

"'She was mine.' Kohinoor sighed, as though she no longer believed it herself. 'Who will fill me with flame now?'

"I understood. I was not Queen long, but I understood. Sisters, even such motley sisters as we, do understand some simple things. The simplest things there are. I extended a long hand from my cage, and she walked into my fingers. Into her smoke, into her throat, into her eyes I reached, and the flame of my palms and my wrists and my fingertips passed into her, lighting the darkness of her bones to a radiant gold, red flames opening like funeral flowers in the base of her belly, streaming from her navel. The roots of her hair glowed incandescent, and in the desert, the Ash-Queen burned.

"'Oh,' she breathed. 'Yes.'

"She wept then, real tears, liquid fire, dripping to scald the earth. And then her body fell into ash, true ash, and her last breath scorched the wind."

"Thank you," said the leopard, sitting at attention. "We are grateful to hear such things, though we are disturbed—rather, I am disturbed on behalf of my mistress."

Indeed, the veiled woman wrung her hands and looked imploringly at her cat with great red eyes. Scald reeled in a length of her hair and obscured her face for a moment, overcome by the memory of the old Queen. "Why?" she said from behind her screen. "It is my tale, it was not meant to disquiet you, it is nothing to you but a story told by a devil caught in a cage."

Rend frowned and pawed the thirsty ground. She purred softly.

"That is not entirely true…"

THE TALE OF THE LEPRESS AND THE LEOPARD

IN URIM, EVERY WINDOW IS HUNG WITH BLACK.

This is not so monotonous as it might seem—shades of black differ as greatly from one to the other as oxblood and cobalt. In our long black banners are infinite designs, spirals and mandorlas of ghostly and intricate design. Within tall citadels the people of Urim contemplate these banners, and it calms them.

For Urim is a city of plague.

It is a hopeless place, and those who are hopeless are its priests and its citizens. Lepers and other ailments of as many varieties as spices in Ajanabh by the thousand gather there, treat one another as they can, salve one another as they may, and die in each other's arms. The wildflower fields surround it in a wide, green-rose circle, like the window of a church, where cures of all fashions are bred and planted and culled. Some of them taste sweet as apples, some bitter as banyan root. Most of them do nothing. But we hope, we always hope. In their ailments, Urimites are brothers, and no city is so full of gentle, exhausted, beneficent folk.

They tore out my mistress's tongue when we came, and chained me to her while she lay broken on their streets.

But I get ahead of myself. It is a cat's habit. We bound and leap and leave the tale far behind, when we should hold it between our paws and worry it to the bone. I shall pierce it with two claws: She found me in the grasslands, and I was cold and gray as slush-snow.

Do you know how a leopard is born? We are mules, soft-nosed and long-tailed. My mother was a lion, my father was a pard of many colors; his pelt was like a war flag. On a day of hunting he found her, her muzzle bloody with antelope, and against the custom of both feline tribes they coupled in the long glare of a screaming sun. They went their ways, as cats will do. And my mother gave birth to one cub, dead as an antelope, as all leopards are born. Our mothers must breathe into our snouts, or our fathers roar into them, or we will take no life. But a new lion with a mane of tangled gold had padded into my mother's pride, and did not care for cubs which were not his own. She left me in the saltbush, unbreathed, unroared.

That was how my mistress found me. Little gray paws curled up toward the sun like old mushrooms, spots like specks of mold, a tongue that never tasted light or meat. Even in her extremity, the woman I came to know as Ruin knelt by that bedraggled, infant cat, fur still stiff with birth water, and without knowing what she did, looked closely at my half-lidded eyes, and breathed into my spotted face.

I woke. I saw her. She was not a lion, or a pard. Her veils were parted to show her face: her cheeks flushed, her eyes scarlet as the inside of a deer, and her skin peeling from her like paper, layer after layer, like pages falling out of a book. I gripped her fingers with my paw and pierced her skin in my eagerness —but drew no blood.

"You cannot hurt me, little one," she said, her voice rough as a tongue. "And as you are quite yellow and black and neither peeling to pieces nor turned to stone, I think perhaps I cannot hurt you…"

THE TALE OF THE GOOD DAUGHTER

I HAD A NAME BEFORE I DIED. I KNOW I DID. I can taste it on my tongue like the ghost of sugar. But I cannot remember it. Ruin I became and Ruin I am. My father said I was an angel, seraphic, holy as myrrh. It was never so, but I tried so hard, I tried for his sake, but Ruin is the whole of me.

Our house was full of bundled spices, yarrow and cinnamon and paprika, bright red turmeric flowers bunched by the windows. My father wore red robes, and taught me to pour out the freezing water into our carnelian font, and put wild celery flowers in my hair, so pungent in their scent that my eyes itched. Everything in our world was red. Red, my father said, was the color of heaven, the color of Stars falling. Red was the color of piety, and so he swathed my crib in it, and my body when I rose from that crib. I knew nothing that was not red.

Is it surprising then that I kept to red things, in the House of Red Spices? Is this piety, to never step outside the shade of your bedclothes? I bathed in the frozen font each day, and I learned, after a very long while of gritted teeth and chattering, to love the blue feeling of its splash on my skin, which was not red, which was nothing like red. Under my bed I collected green things: grass, jade, green silk, clover. White things: chalk, alabaster, dust, daisies. Blue things: lapis, blue crinoline, scraps of paper from the indigo dyers' shops, ice. The ice always melted, but I kept it in vials of crystal, and in some lights, these too were blue. I would take these things and hold them to my chest in the night and dream about water which was warm as a heart.

And then the fields began to die. I did not understand why—I was so young, innocent of everything outside our house; I could not have even matched my stockings if everything I owned had not been red. But I watched them wither and die from the tower windows curtained in scarlet, and I wanted to see the green and the white and the blue and the gold and the violet of them before they were gone. I wanted to lie down in everything not red and feel them crawling over me as they rushed to escape from the world.

I went from my father's door with prayers weighing my wrists. I pulled the earth over me like a hood. I waited. Roots nosed my elbows, the hollows of my knees—and something deep in me hardened into stone. It sat in me, spreading and chewing, and I closed my eyes in the earth. I saw no red, but black.

It hurt so much. That is what I remember. The shoes were wedged onto my feet and in the place within me which had turned to stone, the place which was pumice and sandstone, wrenched in anguish. My skin softened, blood flowed back into flesh, dragging knives behind it. On my red bier my limbs became heavy, prickling like a forgotten finger. I could not even groan for the sear of it. Even when I woke, and stood over my father, tired and empty of piety, the blood in me bellowed, enraged that it was no longer stone, not black, that it was forced into red once more. Every step in my gnarled, twisted cinnamon shoes was filled with the bright, piercing cries of my blood, blood which remembered being stone, which howled to be stone again.

And the shoes, through the howling, whispered. They whispered of the light in the far corners of the city, they whispered that there would be no pain if only I could move fast enough on my feet, if only I could dance, if only the world could whirl around me, swift enough to carry any stone away.

The shoes lied. I danced, I danced every night, and I went to no services, held no red candle until my father dragged me to the altars and tied my ankles to them under my red, red skirts. I danced, endlessly, and every step, every whirl, screamed. As I danced the stone left me, scouring me empty as it went, but it did go. My hair became long and bright again, my cheeks red, my legs nimble. And on one night of all nights, when there was almost no pain left,

only the nagging, grinding ache of my belly, where the stone had begun, I lost my shoes.



I did not mean to lose them: Though they lied and chose their own path, they were good and lovely shoes. I did not feel them when they fell from my heels. I did not go back, searching through the brush and the ruin of courtly orchids trampled by revelers to find them. Some other girl could have them now, I thought: I was well. But as I lay in my red blankets, in my bed so like a bier, the thing in me which had turned to stone as I lay in the earth pricked once more, and hardened a little, like a fist clenching.

My father told me it was nothing.

"Do not think on it," he said, "and it will go away, just as it did before."

"Before," I mumbled, "I had my shoes, red and dusty."

"Perhaps," said he, stern as stone, "you should take up your ablutions again. Perhaps this is your punishment for such unseemly things as you did in the Duke's old Palace."

"I told you, Father, I only danced."

"I will search the city for the sacred shoe that fits your foot," he announced, and though I protested, he turned his back and called his heralds.

But I did as he said, fearful of the hard thing in me like a pit in a plum. I tried to scrub it away in the clear, hard morning water, frantic to melt it back to blood. My father saw this with pleasure, and held up my hair while I shivered. I held the red candle at the altar, and after a time he removed my stays. In the evening he rubbed red spices into my belly and mixed them with his tears. The spices burned, left blisters, trickled from my stomach to the linens.

And all the while, every shoemaker in Ajanabh, which was, certainly, fewer shoemakers than there had been, came to the House of Red Spices. They brought their finest heels and laces, of the twisted roots of tamarisk with rosettes of aloe, scraggle-toed banyan shoes, cedar and pomegranate-wood,

date palm and sandalwood, camphor and wet ginger-shrouded shoes that burned my soles. They brought delicate black vanilla-bean shoes and fragrant maydi-shoes, shoes of nutmeg seeds and shoes of cardamom pods white as pearls. They even brought cinnamon shoes, dusty as my own, but none of these helped, and still my stomach hardened.

And my skin began to peel. Like onion skin, it fell from me. The stone wished to come out as I wished it to wither. I woke in the morning, my flesh sloughed off in the night, the skin beneath new and raw. My father exclaimed —I was healed, I must be healed, such a thing was a miracle of the candle and the altar. My skin lay around me, translucent and dead. But as the days went on, the skin beneath peeled, too, and beneath it was not new skin, red and bright, but more peeling, thin and terrible, like plum rind, sliced away, ruined. My father sent to the Duke's old Palace for every set of cast-off shoes, for every maid that danced, but they were gone, vanished, shredded to flavor some beauty's tea or danced to pieces on a floor I knew as well as my bed.

And still my skin peeled. There seemed to be no end to me, or to the peeling, and my belly was hard and cold, waiting to emerge.

THE TALE OF THE LEPRESS AND THE LEOPARD, CONTINUED

"ONE DAY, MY FEET BARE AMONG A DOZEN PAIRS of shoes, I said to my father:

"'This must stop. I am dead, Father, I am dead and you seek to cure it, but there is no cure here. I shall go to Urim, where all cures reside on shelves of obsidian and pearl. I shall go to the pale white sea, which washes the hem of Urim with all the salt of the world. The dead will walk in the desert—our place is not in the city.'

"And so I came, little cat, peeling and shedding my skin like a snake. I wrapped myself in black so that I would not frighten anyone, and so that the gate of Urim would know me as a pestilent. The stone in me is so heavy, now. Anything I touch hardens. Anyone I touch becomes art, becomes sculpture." Ruin laughed wryly. "Perhaps I have found my calling. But you pierce my skin, you see that I have no blood left but stone, and yet you are soft and sweet and spotted as ever."

I coughed, a tinny kitten's cough. "You breathed into me. I… I am not a leopard, I am not alive. My mother did not give me her breath. You did, a corpse walking wide. Thus, I think, I am dead, still, dead as I was born, as dead as you. We are dead together. How could you harm me? Do you believe, in Urim, there is a salve for you?"

Ruin regarded me calmly, her eyes red and serene. "No. But we always hope."

I nuzzled shyly into her palm. "Take me with you. I have your breath; I am your leopard. You cannot leave me. You must name me and love me and lick

my fur into behaving itself. It is very necessary."

She laughed. "You are not bothered by my eyes, the molt of my skin?"

"How could I be? You are the first woman I have ever seen."

And so it was that we went together, and my legs grew very long, gold and black and wiry. I loved my mistress, and once, just once, when our fire was very low and she looked out across the empty plains between Ajanabh and Urim, I put my unruly head in her lap, and she licked my fur to shining.



We came to Urim in the night, and all things in the city were black. It was a city mourning itself, and how dark were its vestments! We entered; there was no sentry. Urim is not often visited. All things slept, and we sat at the center of the city, waiting for dawn on the lip of a great memorial: a pure white man resting on a bier, his face beatific. On the lip of this slab was carved:

FORGIVE US, FOR WE WERE IN NEED.

Against this nameless man and his nameless bed we huddled; I wrapped my tail around my haunches, and the sky wheeled by over our heads. Sometime before sunrise, a strange creature came walking from a distant road, its footsteps scraping the pale cobbles. It was a woman all of wicker, of brambles and stick, of hazel and red osier, green and pliant willow. It moved smoothly and gracefully for all that, and bowed low to us.

"That is an uncomfortable place to sleep," she said, her voice hard, like branches snapping. "Perhaps it brings you hope, however?" Her eyes were sappy blossom nubs, rose-colored and wet.

Ruin stirred and adjusted her veils quickly, covering her exposed cheek. "We await the day, and the Urimites, to tell us how to live in this place. We are… in need."

"So are we all," answered the wicker-wight. "But he"—the woman indicated the statue—"is the answer to need…"

THE TALE OF THE CATTLE MERCHANT AND THE APPLE

EVERY POOR, LOST CREATURE OF URIM KNOWS this tale, gathers around this pale casket in hope so hot and bright it would burn any who did not know that Urim itself flames with such hope, that you can look nowhere in the city without being blinded.

Long ago there was a man with three daughters. This man lived in a country which bordered a sea so salty it foamed white on the sand, a country full of rich grass and cloudy skies. This man was a cattle merchant, and as all merchants did in those days, he traveled often to Shadukiam to trade. On one such occasion, when he was in need of such sundries as merchants long for: cloth, jewels, food which could not dream of growing in their own countries, he asked his daughters what they would like from the great city.

"A dress which shines as brightly as the last moon of winter!" cried his first daughter, who was called Ubalda, and who loved such things.

"A golden ball, as lovely and round as the first sun of summer!" cried his second daughter, who was called Ushmila. He frowned at her for a long time before he agreed.

"If it please you, Father," said his blushing third daughter, who was called Urim, "I should like an apple."

"No more?" said the merchant, who had certainly not raised his daughters to ask for such silly, simple things. A merchant expects certain tastes from his

children, and he was mightily disappointed.



"No more," answered the girl, whose hair was very red, red as the rarest salamander hide, and whose eyes were very blue, blue as the most costly dolphin skin.

"Very well," said the merchant, and went in search of the meager fortunes which Shadukiam grants to foreigners: enough to snare them, but not enough to make them stay.

Now, as often befalls merchants with one meek daughter and two haughty, fortune did not smile on the cattle merchant. He drove his flock before him, sheep of such fleeces as your mother might have heard of in the oldest stories she knew, and when he crossed into Shadukiam, he was promptly set upon by minor city officials and relieved of his livestock. His throat bled out into the Varil like a sheep cut down for supper, and we would weep for him, save that we have quite enough to do with weeping for our own misfortunes.

As the cattle merchant's body lay drifting into steam below turrets of diamond and bowers of roses, its blood called as it might to a shark, and as the moon rose milk-thick and silent, one of her children approached. He was very tall and thin as a length of paper. His skin and cloaks were the color of the moon—not the romantic, lover's moon, but the true lunar geography: gray and pockmarked, full of secret craters, frigid peaks, and blasted expanses. His eyes had no color in them save for a pinpoint pupil like a spindle's wound—the rest was pure, milk—moon white. He bent over the slaughtered cattle merchant and smiled.

Perhaps you have heard of the Yi. We envy them—how much we would like to shed our bodies when they shrivel to pockmarks and craters. But we cannot.

The Man Dressed in the Moon stepped into the cattle merchant's body like another man steps into his winter coat, and he walked away warm and snug in this new face. And as the Yi are perverse, it amused him to drive the merchant's cart out of the city of Shadukiam with a dress as bright as the last moon of winter, a golden ball as lovely and round as the first sun of summer,

and an apple, a simple, silly apple. He remembered these things in the bones of the cattle merchant's legs, in the veins of his fingertips.

His daughters greeted him with kisses and exclamations of delight, for he kept a scarf at his throat and his skin was still more or less whole and pink. The slight gray pallor they ignored as daughters eager for presents will. He gave Ubalda her dress of deep blue and silver, and Ushmila her golden ball, and urged her to run along and play, and he produced with a flourish the silly, simple apple for pretty little Urim, with her red hair like foreign suns and her blue eyes like foreign seas.

"But, Father, this is not an apple," said the girl, her sweet brow furrowing.

"Ah, but in Shadukiam, this is what is called an apple," the Man Dressed in the Moon crooned.

It was a ruby as deep and darkly shaded as a true apple, and at its ebony stem was an emerald leaf, thin enough to flutter in the wind.

"How shall I eat it, Father?" Urim said.

"Put your teeth into it, girl, like a wolf biting into a reindeer's cheek."

And so the girl did. It tasted, she said, of brandy and cider and the reddest berries she had ever known. Because she was a good child, she shared the fruit with her sisters, and all of them agreed it was lovely, and their father the best of all possible fathers. They ate only half, and kept the rest for the dreary winter. But foreign produce does not often sit well with the provincial daughters of cattle merchants, and the girls sickened, the jewels in their stomachs pricking at their flesh, refusing to dissolve.



And all the while they sickened, their father grew gray and silver and pockmarked, frozen peaks appearing on his cheeks, craters on his arms, and his eyes grew white, white as the salt sea of their home. Now, the daughters of this man, though weak of digestion, were not weak of will, and between them were wise enough to know their father was not their own, and that Shadukiam, as often as it gives, takes and takes and takes. Ushmila

was overfond of books, and she saw the marks of the Yi on her father. Ubalda was overfond of sharp things, scissors and knives and diamonds, and brought her collection to her sisters. It was decided that Urim of the red hair like apple skins and the blue eyes like moonlight would discover the truth of the matter. And so the clever child brought her father the uneaten half of the Shaduki apple, jeweled and wet.

"Father, I am sick, and close to death," said Urim, her face pale as wasting.

The Man Dressed in the Moon smiled hungrily. "How wonderful," he said.

"Surely you do not mean that, Papa!" cried Urim.

"Of course not, my darling! Forgive an old man—his mind runs away without him sometimes."

Urim cast her eyes down, and mourned her father.

"Will you not share this apple with me? It would comfort me, in my dying, for though it hurts me so, I have never tasted anything so sweet."

The Man Dressed in the Moon's face softened as much as it might, for he believed well in the greed of young girls, and he folded her into his arms. "It would delight me, my darling daughter."

Urim cut a slice of apple for the pocked Yi, and he chewed it with the relish of an alligator sucking the bones of a finch. But soon enough he began to cough, and choke, for Urim had poisoned her foreign apple, and the daughters of the cattle merchant, Ubalda and Ushmila, rushed from the shadows and leapt upon the gray-skinned creature, cutting into him over and over—but never enough to kill. They had no Griffin's talon, and could not hope for death. Urim sliced his cheeks with the faceted edges of her apple, grinning wildly into the face that had once been her father's.

"Let it never be said," she cried, "that the daughters of a cattle merchant do not know how to put an animal down!"

THE TALE OF THE LEPRESS AND THE LEOPARD, CONTINUED

"THEY WERE AS CLEVER AS A PACK OF HYENAS, those girls," the wicker-wight said. "They did not kill the Yi, but opened his skin and took the thinnest shavings of his bones—how they must have shone, like shards of the moon itself!—and these Urim instructed them to place on their tongues. The bones melted to vapor and the girls were healed, the sharp apple-jewels in their bellies melting to nothing. And Urim, wise child, kept her father barely alive, collecting his blood in the glass jars they had used for sheep's milk, and put his body into a casket of white stone." She nodded at the memorial. "A city grew around this casket, on the edge of the white and salted sea, and when folk were in need, shavings were carefully taken from his bones, placed on their tongues, and the casket sealed up again. After one hundred years, the Man Dressed in the Moon stopped screaming." The wicker-wight looked down, ashamed. "Urim, named for that clever girl who wanted only an apple, became famous. More and more came. I came. My branches were drier than the skull of a lion left in the waste when I finally arrived at the gates. My skin was gone; all that remains was what you see. How this came to pass is not important—is the beginning of illness ever remembered so clearly as its boils and blood and broken, aching bones? The moment when you breathe your last clear air? One never remembers it. I am afflicted; so are we all. When first I came I was sure that Urim would hold me in its black-clothed embrace, look on me with her gray and mothering eyes, and brush my brow with her lips. She would give me an apple and a shaving of bone. I would walk from her whole. But there are so

few cures in Urim, these days. The Yi's bones are not infinite. They are precious. We do not all deserve them."

I yawned. Of course my mistress deserved all things. "Will you wait with us, for the dawn?" I asked the poor, empty woman.

"Of course."

I have told you what happened. The dawn came. Black-robed lepers came hobbling on canes of ash and hazel, having heard that one of their number had arrived, and they embraced us as sisters. Their hands safe on Ruin's veils, they told us we were loved, that flowers would be rubbed into our wounds, that there were altars ready for our knees. If we were fortunate, if we were worthy, perhaps we would be granted a sliver of bone. A leper with one leg reached out to cup Ruin's face in his rotted hands, his eyes alight with joy. He said:

"There are no veils in Urim, my dear. Show us your affliction—we do not care for beauty."

With a stifled cry of relief, Ruin pulled her veils from her face, and with it came peels of skin like pages torn from a book, and the lepers recoiled.

"You are not a leper!" one cried, covering her mouth with one putrid hand, green mold springy and thick in the webbing of her fingers.

"She is dead," whispered the first. "She is dead, already dead, and her death will spread among us like plague."

A third, his nose a crusted red gape in his face, hissed: "She shall not have the bones! They are ours! She cannot have them!"

A fourth wondered if perhaps she was not Yi herself, with bones for their tongues.

Lepers know well not to touch the sick—they embraced her thinking her like them, but they could not risk contracting whatever other vile illness she bore. They beat her with their canes and slashed out her tongue, so that she could not give their names to the night.

THE TALE OF THE WASTE, CONCLUDED

"I SNARLED AND LEAPT AND TRIED TO BITE them, but I am only a cat, and I was not raised to hunt, only to walk with her in the waste." Rend raised a paw over her eyes. "They chained me to her, so that my thrashing would only harm my mistress, and left us battered against the white casket. They took her tongue gingerly, in gloved hands, to see if it could be boiled into medicine. After a long while, she stirred as if dreaming, and I pulled her from the city. She is dead; she did not bleed. I am as near to dead as makes no difference among leopards; I did not bleed. The silver chain suits us, we find. We are bound, she and I, and now we go home, to Ajanabh, where there are red spices and no cures, where she may lie down again in the earth and rest, and I may mourn my mother. When she has gone to stone entirely, I shall carry her on my back into the city, and place her before the House of Red Spices, and sparrows shall live in her hair, and I shall live at her feet."

Ruin wept, and in her tears tiny specks of flesh washed away. Rend looked at her with huge black eyes full of feline grief.

The Djinn looked at the black-veiled woman as well, her red eyes dim with despair.

"I cannot give you back your tongue," Scald said slowly, her hair clearing from her flaming face, "but I could heal you." She cleared her burning throat. "Well, I could try. My wishing days are done, the Khaighal saw to that. But if you would free me, I could try."

"How could we open such a cage?" the leopard said.

"I suspect that if your mistress were to touch the bars, they would turn to stone, and could be as easily broken as any other stone."

"And what would you do, if we were to set you free?" The leopard clawed the ground uncertainly.

Scald looked into the east, across the cracked earth with its ruined gold and scurrying mice. "Kohinoor was right. I am old now, nearly fourteen. I have not long left. I would go home, to Ajanabh, and converse with my friend spider, and dance with the Sirens, and burn in Lantern's tail, and let my hand fall once or twice on Solace's hair. I would watch the Carnival, and listen to Agrafena every morning as the sun graces her bows. I would see how my wives had got on. I would tell Hour such a story, such a story!" The Djinn-Queen closed her fire-rimmed eyes. "I would swim in the Vareni, and hear the bells ring out, and when all was done I would put my cheek to Simeon's fingers, and rest."

Tears flooding her rheumy eyes, Ruin raised her arms and threw back her black cowl. Beneath it was sparse hair and skin like shavings of bone. Her skull showed through black strands, and her cheeks were hollow, translucent. She was made of glass, glass which was fainting back into sand. Her mouth was dry and white and chapped, and though she opened it, no sound came. She reached out with both hands toward the cage, and as her fingers grazed the Djinn-bones, the bone-bars flushed red and porous, Basilisk-bright. Wordless laughter erupted from Ruin's broken mouth, and it mingled with her wrenching cries. The cage shivered red, at the end of all things, as red as Ruin's house, her shoes, her father. And as she released the bars, Scald put her incandescent palms to them, and they sloughed to molten white. The Djinn emerged, her smoke-hair spreading free around her, with no baskets to contain it, like spilled water.

"What will you do to her?" whispered the cat nervously, inching close to her mistress.

"My darling cat." The Djinn smiled. "I shall breathe into her, and bring her to life. There is no stone that cannot be rendered like the fat of a cow in fire—if the fire is hot enough."

"Will it hurt her?" Rend's spotted, gold-furred head lolled anxiously on the earth.

"Very much."

Scald drew a long breath, and the desert seemed to shimmer into her. Her chest cracked, and beneath the black skin embers flushed bright as two suns, then in her arms, and in her cheeks, and how she blazed, then, her face puffed and ready, her breath held, her painted palms phosphorescent. She blew out her breath, and the wind and fire of it was white as a Star at the center of a city, engulfing Ruin in light. Rend cowered and scrabbled away, singeing her tail. Ruin burned, a red candle in the blasted waste, and even after Scald had wheezed and coughed her last flames, the dead girl stood with her arms raised to the sky, her flesh peeling off in blazing strips like the ash that floats from a summer bonfire.



It was hours before she stopped.

Once, in the wasteland between Urim and Ajanabh, three long shadows were cast on the thirsty earth, whose dark cracks forked out in all directions like vines searching for the smallest trickle of water. Three long shadows lay black and sere on that fractured desert. A woman, a Djinn, and a leopard stared at each other over the golden earth, and the woman fell to her knees, her body burned and pink and blistered, but whole. Her hair was burned away, her bald head shone in the last rays of the sun, and she put her living, blood-bright hands to her soft belly and screamed into the ground, screamed, and laughed, and wept.

In the Garden

IT WAS NEARLY DAWN. A GHOSTLY BLUE LIGHT LAY ON THE CHILDREN, stippled with stars. Long shadows lay on the snow, and the fires had gone out in the center of the Garden, and the braziers at the Gate had guttered to smoking embers. The courtiers wandered back into the Palace, full of rhinoceros horn and cinnamon wine, dogs with bells on their collars leaping at their mistresses' hems. The laces which held the chestnut boughs in the shape of a chapel were loosed, and sprang back with red-barked relief into their accustomed fork-boughed shapes. The wood beyond the Gate was dark and deep, and in it nightingales and starlings sang, pecking in the snow in search of the sun. The lake with its frozen reeds was still, as still as the world becomes before dawn, a hesitant hare testing the ice for thickness with its forepaw.

The boy and the girl sat together, huddled for warmth. The world before dawn is very still, but also very cold, and it seemed as though everything had been conquered by blue, even the girl's shivering lips.

"That is all," the boy said. "There is no more."

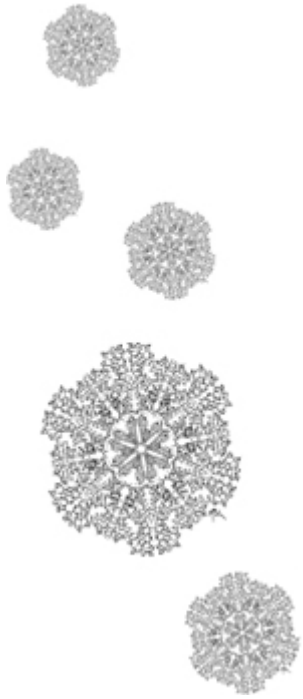
The girl opened her eyes, her hair wet with melted snow, her scarlet gown black in the dark. "That was a wonderful story," she said, a smile opening like a lily on her face.

The boy frowned, his face suddenly grown-up and very serious. "And there will be no others, no more strange and no more wonderful. It is over."

The girl touched his face gently, putting her cold hands on his cheeks. "Do you wish you had never asked me, that day, why my eyes were dark, like the

lake before the dawn?"

"No… but I thought… I thought something would happen. There would be lightning and thunder or a terrible pillar of smoke and something dreadful would come out."



"I don't know," the girl said. "I never knew what would happen."

"Maybe," the boy whispered eagerly, "nothing will happen. I can come to you every day until I am Sultan, and then you can come to me, in the Palace, and sit at my table without a veil."

The girl shut her eyes, and the vast blackness of her lids glinted in the blue snow-light. No letters moved on them, they were dark and smooth and empty, no more than a mark, no more than ink. An owl flew overhead, home from a night of hunting.

"Perhaps," the girl said. "There is always a moment when stories end, a moment when everything is blue and black and silent, and the teller does not want to believe it is over, and the listener does not, and so they both hold their breath and hope fervently as pilgrims that it is not over, that there are more tales to come, more and more, fitted together like a long chain coiled in the hand. They hold their breath; the trees hold theirs, the air and the ice and the wood and the Gate. But no breath can be held forever, and all tales end." The girl opened her eyes. "Even mine."

"Yes, my dear, even yours," said a gentle, rough voice, like the feathers of a goose's wings rubbing together.

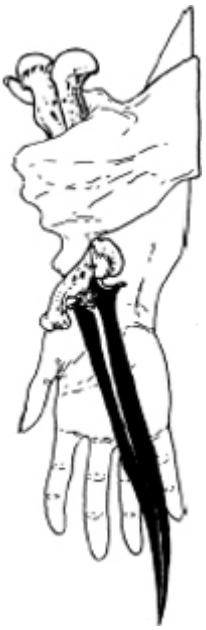
The girl turned and saw, on the other side of the Gate, on the other side of the wrought-iron battle with its cannon of ice, a bent old woman with tangled silver hair and a long, hooked nose. The girl caught her breath like a fawn in sight of a wolf, and her hands began to tremble.

"You are here… you are here to judge me," she said, her throat dry.

"That would be a severe interpretation," said the crone with a sly grin.

The girl's great dark eyes filled up with tears, glittering like snowflakes in firelight. She bit her lip. "Am I good?" she blurted. "Was I good enough? Am I a

good girl? I am not wicked, like they said. I am not a demon, I swear it. Was I good enough for the spirit? I tried so hard not to be wicked, or angry, or bitter, even when the night was very cold."



The crone tucked a silver strand of hair behind her ear. "Do you remember me?" she asked, as though she had not heard anyone speak.

The girl dried her eyes with the heels of her hands. "Yes," she said, "you came when I was little, as little as one of my brown-backed geese. You told me about the tales. And you gave me my knife." The girl drew it out of her crimson dress, the small, curving silver knife with its handle of bone.

The old woman nodded. "It is my knife. But it was better that you have it. You were more often hungry than I."

"Please," the girl said. "How does it end? How do I end? I have waited so long."

The old woman wound her hands in the dead, dry rose-roots of the Gate. "Oh, my darling girl," she whispered, her voice thick, "I know you have."

THE LAST TALE

ONCE, THERE WAS A FERRY ON A LONELY GRAY lake on a lonely gray shore. It creaked in the storms and the wind, and its tether stretched. A man with a hunch on his back poled it back and forth, clothed all in rags.

Once, there was a lonely island in a lonely lake, and on that lonely island was a woman with green scales glittering on her skin, and she walked the shore, and the eyes that blinked on the gray lakeside wept for her. But the woman did not weep. She wrung her fingers and looked into the mist and considered many things, for her mind was as vast as the lake itself. From time to time a young man with red skin like fine wood came to find her, and stroke her green-black hair. But she could not be consoled, and finally stepped onto the cracked boards of the dock and opened her throat to call the ferry. She called until her voice died on the wind, dry as a molted skin. Please, *she called.* Please come back.

It did not concern the ferryman if the lake folk needed him. But he could not help but hear the snake-woman's cries, and when the day's storms had passed, leaving his bones wet and his lizards irritable, he let the ferry drift as it wanted to—for sometimes in his loneliness the man believed the ferry as alive as he, and he spoke to it, and listened to its troubles, which had mostly to do with barnacles and algae. But the ferry now spoke of a voice pulling at it like a pole, and it longed to go toward that voice, that snake-song which flicked its tongue at the poor ferry in the fog. They

floated out to the island with the beach of eyes, and there was the woman with her glittering green skin, her long hair wet and plastered to her hips, her eyes dark and needful.

"I want to see her," she said, before the ferryman had finished his docking.

"That is impossible."

"No, it is not. You ferry anyone, if they pay the toll. I will pay. In the world, in the Sun, in the blood-riddled world, my daughter is breathing and eating her breakfast with a golden fork and laughing at a joke the cook has told her. I want to see her." The woman's eyes softened with depthless pleading. "Just once."

"And what do you think you can pay?"

"You took the huldra's tail."

"I did."

"Will you take my hair?"

The ferryman considered. He did not wish to. It was not right, and not his habit. But he should, perhaps, have refused the child in the first place, and to become priggish now seemed useless, small. The tolls these days were strange, and he had seen more tolls than he had ever seen years in the world. He thought perhaps he had tired of them, the endless coins, and these late, grotesque amputations.

"I will take it," he said slowly, his voice echoing not at all in the thick fog, "but you must agree to my terms."

The woman waited, her green a scream of desire in the gray.

"I will take your hair as two tolls—across, and back. You may not go as the goose-woman went, into the world to live and eat bread and dance. You must come back. You are not like her. Go to your child, just once, and return to me, to the lonely lake and the lonely shore. This is all that is right and proper."

The woman nodded, and gathered her long, shimmering green-black hair into her hand. With the sharp edge of the ferryman's wing-bones, she severed it at her neck, and stepped on board the ferry. It sighed under her, glad in what ways nails and wood can be glad. They drifted into the lake, and Zmeya looked back to the shore, where two young men with red skin like a ship's hull stared after the dwindling raft. She raised her hand, and the mist closed over her.

She stood above her daughter's crib. It was a beautiful room, with a fire in the marble hearth and a bottle of hot wine on a little glass table. The crib was cedar, and the blankets were pure and white as a dove's belly. The little girl had a shock of dark hair and her red fingers were curled into fists, her tiny brow furrowed as she dreamed. Zmeya opened the window, so that the light of the Stars could stream in, the light of the Moon, the dark of the Sky. Dappled silver light fell onto the child's face.

"Sorrow," she whispered. "My Sorrow, my love."

Tears welled up in her eyes, tears of light, of Snake-light and Star-light. Zmeya lit the room like a brazier, her silver self spilling into the corners. She had not known such light in her skin since before the Boar-King had taken her. It filled up her throat so she could not breathe. She had forgotten what it felt like to be so bright. She knelt by the crib, her jagged, shorn hair dripping light like blood, and smiled at her daughter. She wanted to stay, after all. She wanted to put a veil over her hair and take this child downstairs into the spinning world of the court, and watch her grow up. She wanted to make sure that the Moon and the Stars were always on her. She wanted to hold her child to her as she had done on the lonely island, and feel her living mouth tug at her breast.

Slowly, Zmeya reached out a glowing finger, and with infinite care, caressed her daughter's eyelids, the first and last touch of the Star and her daughter in the lakeless world.

The skin beneath her finger curled black and steaming, and shadows leapt from the smoking flesh. Sorrow began to cry. A nurse came bustling in, and Zmeya stepped into the shadows and the starlight, chagrined.

Once, there was a ferry on a lonely gray lake on a lonely gray shore. It creaked in the storms and the wind, and its tether stretched. A man with a hunch on his back poled it back and forth, clothed all in rags. He saw a woman walking along the shore toward him, her hair short and unkempt, her eyes red with weeping. She came to the ferry and looked up at him stonily.

"I only wanted to touch her, with living hands, my living child. Just once."

"Was it enough?" the ferryman asked.

Zmeya was a long time answering.

"Yes," she said finally, and stepped onto the ferry once more.

Out of the Garden

"WHAT SHE LEFT ON YOUR EYELIDS, SORROW, MY DOVE, MY DARLING, my little goose," said the old woman, "was your history, winding and tangling back and back and back. It was your story, the story of your birth, your life, swinging forward and backward like a holy censer, the tendrils of its smoke reaching out and around and into each other like the coils of a snake, pursuing all those strange and varied folk with a Star's tenacity. They are the tales of everyone who reached into silver shadows and pulled you into the world: your mother, who was a murdered Star; your father, a lonely creature who loved a raft that became a tree and a tree that became a red ship; a tea leaf that found its way out of the world and quickened a dead woman's womb, and the girl who carried it there; the boy who paid your fare across the water, the women who pushed your mother back from death, the Basilisk three women mutilated to speak once more before they died, the bear who was turned back, and the flame-hearted Djinn who was born from your eyelids burning beneath your mother's hand, who drifted into the world before you." The crone smiled, her face breaking into wrinkles, her eyes spilling with tears. "And perhaps not least the woman who carried you on the ferry, who was once a goose, who took a child away from her cradle and far away, who left you instead, a magpie's trick, who watched over you, and gave you a knife to keep you from hunger and safe, her own knife, the one she used to kill a Wizard when she was very, very young. Your name is Sorrow, my little bird, my dear-as-diamonds, and you have been loved all your days."

The girl could not breathe. She coughed, and wept, and crumbled into the snow. Aerie opened the Gate and took the girl into her arms. She stroked her hair. She whispered to her and dried her tears. The boy watched, his mouth open, trying to remember every tale and losing them as quickly as they rose up in his heart, golden fish that would not stay.

Out of the wood a young girl came. She was very beautiful, and she wore a wispy red dress that seemed made for dancing. All along her right side ran stark tattoos: a dancing black flame. Beside her were a great Firebird, a black, smoking Djinn, and a small brown spider with glittering legs. The young girl walked slowly to Sorrow, who untangled herself from Aerie and stood to face her. Solace touched the girl's eyelids softly, and looked into the white-hushed Garden.

"So this is where I would have lived, if I had not become a Firebird's daughter," she said. "Did you like it?"

Sorrow blushed. "No," she whispered. "It was cold at night. I think… I think I have paid for your fire with my sadness since we were born."

Solace grew very serious. "I am sorry." She folded the other girl into her dancer's arms, and kissed her cheek. They looked so much alike, the boy thought, standing like that, with their faces buried in one another's shoulders, all that long black hair mingling.

"But now we will be sisters," Solace said brightly, brushing Sorrow's hair from her face. "And you will learn to dance with me, I promise."

The Djinn floated forward, and Sorrow could see, in her eyes, how old she was now, the ancient, guttering fire. She was still as youthful-looking as any flame, her stomach taut and black, her palms gleaming, but she was so tired.

"I think," she said, one red eyebrow arched, "that you are, somehow, my mother. At least as much as you are her sister. Aerie has tried to explain it, but I was never good at history. But it would seem I am the only Djinn of seared flesh, and that is something to know before one is blown out."





"Why did you leave me for so long?" Sorrow cried, unable to contain herself. "I was so alone! I was so frightened! You could have come for me anytime! Why did you wait?"

Aerie regarded her solemnly. "The world is wide, and the rearing of children is a delicate thing. But, heart of my heart, I knew"—and from her skirts she drew a long, golden feather—"that all tales end. And I, and all, would be here when it was time for yours to begin."

"Come with us," said Solace.

"I… I am afraid!" Sorrow said. "I have never been outside the Gate, ever! I have wished for it, so many times, but I am so afraid!"

Aerie bent and took the girl's dark face in her hands. Her laughing eyes were black as a bird's. "Sorrow, come. Come into the world, into the land beyond wishing, where, I swear to you, there are miracles: a multitude of Griffins, and a Papess at prayer, and lost girls found, and a Satyr laughing in a cottage by the sea."

Solace turned to Lantern and the two shared a glittering and conspiratorial expression. The spider said nothing, but clicked her silver legs together. He turned and let a long, glistening cloak fall from his back, and Solace caught it. She wrapped her sister's shivering shoulders in a cloak of golden feathers, and arranged her hair over its collar.

"Come," she said, "I will show you so many strange and wonderful things."

The boy squeaked. He had meant to make a much more grown-up sound, but it came out a squeak. He did not know what he wanted, he did not know what to say, but his face was stricken, his mouth trembling—he tried valiantly not to cry.

"You were not always alone," he managed to say. "Not always."

And the girl, his girl, looked at him for a very long time, as still and strange as she had ever been, her dark eyes showing stark in the first pale light that tipped the trees like snow. She stood there, her hand clasped tight in Solace's

painted hand, a Djinn at her shoulder, a Firebird at her back, a spider at her feet, and an old grandmother with her hand resting on her shoulder. He wanted to run to her, but he dared not. He did not belong; he knew he did not belong with them. He would be sent back to the Palace to sit alone on a hard throne. But as the sun rose up like a pearl in the winter sky, Sorrow looked at the boy, her boy, and smiled, her eyes bright as feathers.

"Tell me a story," she said. "Tell me the tale of how we met when we were children, how we walked in a Garden and you were not afraid of me, and how we went into the world, and learned even more strange and wonderful things than we could have guessed at when our walls were made of flowers. Tell me a tale I have never heard, with a boy and a girl in it, and a long, wide road."

Sorrow held out her pale, thin hand, shining in the morning like a promise.

The boy looked back over his shoulder, at the Palace, but only once. He laced his fingers into hers.

As they walked into the wood, Lantern sang out the morning bells. Behind them, in the golden light of a scalding sun, a purple bracelet slowly sank into the snow.



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